

PC XBOX 360 GBA DS MOBILE PSP PLAYSTATION 2

JUNE 2006 VOLUME 9 ISSUE 3

SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING COMPUTER GAMING & TECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

NAG

Dark Messiah

MIGHT AND MAGIC

If reality is the result of your perception, and the Cover DVD isn't here, then you forgot to make it exist. It was there when we last checked.



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29 Sep - 1 Oct 2006

The Dome, Northgate

rAge

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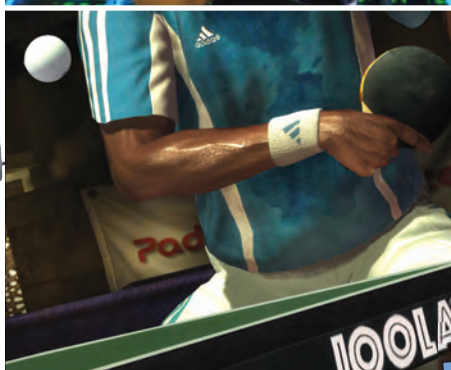
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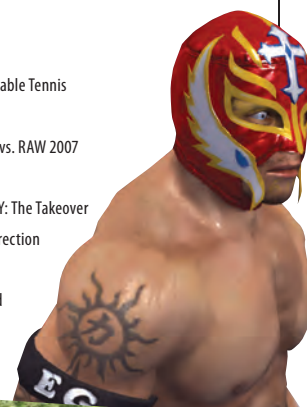
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Pushing the Limits

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Second-hand games are awesome. A friend who recently bought a PlayStation 2 has been having a ball buying top games at ridiculous prices by scouring classified ads. Right now *God of War* is tearing a hole through the television and all it cost was a measly eighty rands. On the same note, budget buys constitute a big portion of local game sales. A blockbuster title at R399 might move copies, but the big money makers are the games that sell well over a long period.

This is one of Bethesda's prime hopes for *Oblivion*: that it mimics *Morrowind* and becomes a steady long-term seller. In the book world, that is what constitutes a blockbuster. When a hardcover or paperback sells steadily for long periods, it's considered a major success. In games, though, we seem enchanted right up to the point of its release and then we quickly tear through it, anticipating in the back of our minds what will come next. That's definitely appealing, but unless you are a hardcore enthusiast with a hefty bank balance, it's impractical.

What is hardcore? Another friend made a similar comparison: "When you are a pretender, you try and fit in; when you are for real, you do it because you love it." He was referring to heavy drinking, though, but the point stands. So what happens when you can't afford the new games, the hardware or the peripherals? Does it mean you aren't 'hardcore' because you can't afford to support your hobby? A lot of gamers seem to think so, yet games sit on the shelves a lot longer than that initial burst of interest. Nothing stops a player from trying an older title for the first time – and you definitely won't be any poorer from the experience. So, if you can't afford the latest stuff (or grumble about there being nothing new), take a look around for budget and second-hand stuff. *Flatout*, *God of War*, *Spartan*, *Beyond Good & Evil*... already four titles that you might have missed but really should play. There's a lot more where that comes from.

James Francis [Editor]



NAG REVIEW RIGS SUPPLIED BY:

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- Supports NVIDIA SLI Technology
- Supports PCI Express and 8 pipelines
- Microsoft DirectX 9.0C and OpenGL 1.5 support
- Integrated with 256MB DDR2 / 128MB GDDR3 memory and 128-bit memory interface
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- Unique Silent-Pipe II design



GIGABYTE Silent-PIPE II

Standard Fan Solution
Others 6600 GT Heatpipe Solution



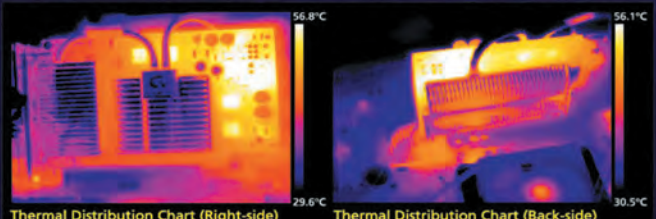
Testing platform:
MB: K8NP-SLI CPU: AMD SOCKET939 2700+ RAM: DDRII 533/256M *1 OS: Windows XP Professional SP2
Test Condition: 35°C Chamber CPU Fan Speed: 3200rpm / 12 V System Fan Speed: 1200rpm / 5 V
Driver version: 77.72

- Natural convection design
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Under the thermal cam system monitoring, purple color means lower temperature, and white color means higher temperature.

LETTER OF THE MOMENT

FROM: Demented

SUBJECT: It's not about the license

It's all about the developer. Just look at licensed games such as *King Kong*, *WarHammer40K: Dawn of War* and *Riddick: EFBB*. Now look closer. The development team behind *King Kong* is also partly responsible for *Prince of Persia* – a game with a license that means [edited]. *Dawn of War* was developed by Relic – responsible for the award winning *Homeworld*. And whilst Starbreeze studios didn't exactly make *Enclave* a hit, the game proved fun and had a good debut. And look what they did with *Riddick*.

King Kong was not only limited to a license, but also to a movie and a particular storyline; the team still managed to pull off a creative masterpiece. The team behind *Riddick* claimed that a license helped them by allowing them to focus on game dynamics, rather than a world. That's valid, but it doesn't excuse games like *Oblivion* and (mark my words) *UT2007* – thanks to *Shadow of the Colossus*.

I think in many cases licenses gets thrown to the lesser, incapable companies so that the challenge isn't as daunting. This was true for the Tolkien Foundation's move regarding 'The Fellowship of the Ring'. The *LOTR* movie license was different – it got handed to the old Westwood team for fear of failing Jackson, which happened in any case – Jackson elected Ubisoft over EA for the *King Kong* license. If he's not satisfied with that then someone should hit him with a 17".

At the end of the day, it's still up to a suitable developer – not necessarily a good or bad developer: Relic (good) has revitalised the *Warhammer* license, whereas Shiny (also good) completely stuffed up *Enter the Matrix*. The developer needs to be well chosen. And Starbreeze (formerly 'who?') iconised *Riddick*.

Your complaints about Oblivion were cut because of the letter length, plus 90% of the gamers out there will be inclined to disagree with you. But you are right in pointing to the developer as the source of a good or bad license game. Once again, the same could be said for an original title. It is true that a lot of license development goes to more inexperienced teams, but everyone has to start somewhere. It's better to have them cut their teeth on a licensed game that will sell anyway than an original title that might bomb and lose a lot of money. License development has also helped a lot of top developers stay afloat, especially in the British industry. Licensed titles are good income bringers, so a lot of companies see the benefits in a cutthroat market. Often licenses give developers a rich amount of concepts to work with. The restrictions placed by license holders and business red tape are often what cause problems. Maybe we should start pressuring publishers to give license developers more free reign. They, not the guy who made the movie, know how to develop games, after all.



The 'Letter of the Moment' prize is sponsored by EA South Africa. The winner receives two games for coming up with the most eclectic chicken scratch.

IMPORTANT STUFF! PAY ATTENTION!
Land Mail: P.O. Box 237, Olivedale, 2158
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Important: Include your details when mailing us or how will you ever get your prize if you win...

TOPIC FOR NEXT MONTH:

Are game revivals a good idea? Which games should be brought back?

FROM: Leon du Plessis

SUBJECT: Swearing in games

What's with all the swearing in games today? The first game that really bothered me was *Max Payne 2*, mostly because I installed it on my mother-in-law's machine, and was enthusiastically showing off my new game when Max loudly announced [that] he wanted to [edited] someone. After a stunned silence, I switched off the machine.

Since then, swearing seems to have become the 'in' thing in games. While some games justify themselves by being 'true' to the story, like the gangsters in *GTA*, or prisoners in *The Suffering*, it is still extremely annoying. Some swearing is really out of place. Take *F.E.A.R.* If I'm going to create an army of clones, I certainly wouldn't bother teaching them how

to swear. *Still Life* also features a foul-mouthed female detective. Maybe they thought this made her a stronger character? It doesn't matter how 'real' graphics get, blood and gore are still just pixels. Swearing, on the other hand, is swearing.

It also means I don't want to play my games on my surround sound system, because my wife doesn't like [the] swearing at high volume, and I agree with her. The funny thing is, while you can switch off the graphical violence, there's no option for turning off the swearing.

I don't consider myself a prude. A well-placed four-letter word can do wonders to build atmosphere in a game, but excessive swearing is irritating and can ruin a game completely. It becomes a cheap way of connecting with an 'older' audience. Swearing

is getting way to common each day. What's next? A NAG award of [edited] excellence?

An option to turn off or bleep-out offensive language would definitely be a welcome addition to games, because it's about choice. But at that same level, swearing isn't exactly a taboo topic, and as such is slowly gaining appeal amongst some game script writers. It's not unnatural – having a graphically violent or intensely gritty atmosphere without contextual language doesn't seem right. It doesn't mean that developers should add swearing, but it is their artistic prerogative to do so. Besides, the games you mention all carry age restrictions. The concept of swearing is slow to take root in gaming, largely because of its large youth market. The first game we can recall that had swearing was Duke Nukem 3D, so swearing hasn't exactly just popped onto the stage. It took quite a while before games like Max Payne and GTA had the cultural freedom to work more with rougher language. Not everyone likes it, but there is a colour to it. Can you imagine Pulp Fiction without its colourful dialogue? Games still rank well below movies, though, and swearing is still kept at a minimum. This will change, but it's best to consult the rating on the box – this usually indicates language issues. But expect more swearing, not less. It's inevitable that some designers will want to expand into this area.

Swearing in games is usually added by the players





FROM: Gazza_N

SUBJECT: Game stories?

During the past few months I have managed to complete several of what are considered top gaming titles. The culprits in question are *F.E.A.R.* and *Half-Life 2*, with the Source Engine version of *Half-Life* following hot on their heels. Now remember, these games are supposed to be the cream of the crop, the highest of the high in terms of gaming goodness, and for all intents and purposes I thoroughly enjoyed playing them, while I was playing them. Yes, I enjoyed the gameplay, but with both games I was left with a strange, empty feeling once the final credits had rolled. A feeling that I'd been short-changed somehow, even though gameplay-wise both were unlike anything I had played before. I've been thinking (miracles never cease) and I think that I've discovered why I feel so disappointed.

I've found that *Half-Life*, its sequel, and *F.E.A.R.* all have a common factor: they are all based on a superb, original premise, but never really do justice to it plot-wise. Take *Half-Life 2*, for instance. Valve created a vibrant, detailed, and frighteningly realistic representation of a world under an all-powerful alien race, but never once built on it beyond "you have to save everyone." [The] net result - you have an intricately detailed game world and potentially interesting characters with personality and charm, but these never do anything but give you an excuse to move from one location to another in order to shoot things. It's shallow, and a waste of a good concept.

This isn't limited to first-person shooters either (remember, these are shooters that were praised by many for their storylines). Same thing with *NWN* - while the plot was certainly deeper than many other games, it still existed solely to send you carving through endless hordes of monsters (although the henchman subplots were

excellent). And CRPG's are supposed to be the cream of gaming experience? I spit on them!

Why then do developers insist on [developing] games this way? I suspect that this is the reason why so many games end up being so uninspiring. Frankly, if the developers want to focus on gameplay, then they really shouldn't bother with anything but a back-story to set the scene. Likewise, if developers want to bother with a story it should drive the gameplay, not *vice versa*. Neither approach is easy, as it requires that either your gameplay is solid enough to stand on its own, or that your story is good enough to keep the player engaged with fresh experiences throughout. Games that know where their focus lies almost always end up being rich and satisfying gaming experiences. Maybe when developers wake up to this fact we'll see games living up to their full potential.

Alas, this letter had to be severely edited. Please remember folks, we only have limited space. But it makes a good point: what about stories in games? We all know that stories have long been the black sheep of game development, but that's because games don't really need a story. If a title is designed around its story, that's another matter, but unlike a movie a game experience doesn't need to be defined or aided much by its story. Some games work perfectly with no plot whatsoever. That doesn't mean game developers shouldn't be aiming higher. Developers seem to forget that story is a very useful aspect of a game experience. A gamer playing 24 recently commented about how well the story works in drawing players into the game. But if you want to play a game for its story, it's best to have one recommended. Stories are not a strong feature in games and for more than just play dynamic reasons. Can you imagine an Apocalypse Now game? How would a developer capture the plot

and complexity in a game environment? That's tough, if not nonsensical and possibly impossible. Musicians also release concept albums from time to time featuring a set of songs that make up a larger story. But these are regarded as experimental releases, because story isn't always conducive to a song. Sure, the lyrics tell you something, but it's the music that gets you interested. Perhaps the game dynamic IS the way games tell their stories.

FROM: bRakR

SUBJECT: Licensed Gaming

Let me just put it to you straight; Licensed Gaming - NO. Just mind [sic] your mind towards [the] *Lord of the Rings* games, *Matrix*, *Harry Potter* etc. True, true, some more recent games like 24 might have some potential, but generally speaking, there's just no point in making a game out of something that everyone's already read/watched before. [It's] just like reading it or watching it again. I do leave a few exceptions however. [If], like in some more recent games, the game doesn't follow the original storyline, but just uses the same characters etc, it can be a very interesting play. Also, like in some games, if the game is just so outstandingly good that one can forget that you've 'been there, done that'. And in finishing, I have always had a soft spot for old cartoon-based licensed games such as *Toy Story 2* and *Timon* [sic] and *Pumba*.

PS: What does NAG stand for? My best guess so far is: Nerds And Geeks.

NAG stands for New Age Gaming. So, by your brand of logic if we saw the Doom or Mortal Kombat movies we don't need to play the games? There is a massive difference between the passive media of film and television compared to the interactivity of games. In a game, stories, plots and background info can be approached at a different level. While in the show you see the characters spend most of the time talking, in the game you experience the bits where they run around and accomplish things. If GTA was a movie, most of the travel sequences would be quick, with the dialogue and missions-specific action taking the main focus. But in the game you can flip your car over three times and try land on a pimp. Each medium has its own advantages, so just because something already exists in one doesn't mean it won't benefit from being in another.

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IN THE WORLD OF GAMES

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Solid Snake on the silver screen? After the success *Silent Hill* had as a movie, it appears that Konami is more open to the idea. [13]

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A report suggests that the king of the next-gen hill won't be decided by the consoles, but by the formats they support. [18]

CALENDAR

What's happening and what you'll be able to buy in June. [20]

NINTENDO REVOLUTION RENAMED Wii

TO THE SHALLOW MIND, Nintendo has always appeared to be a bumbling company with unsure footing in the gaming market. The more knowledgeable who pay attention will have already found that every 'strange' thing Nintendo has done in the past, has always ultimately become some sort of industry standard in its favour. That's the Nintendo secret: doing things that seem dumb but are actually smart.

What may become the biggest event in this line of strategy is the renaming of the Nintendo Revolution to the Nintendo Wii.

From the Nintendo press conference: "Introducing ... *Wii*. As in 'we'. While the code-name 'Revolution' expressed our direction, *Wii* represents the answer. *Wii* will break down that wall that separates videogame players from everybody else. *Wii* will put people more in touch with their games ... and each other. But you're probably asking: What does the name mean? *Wii* sounds like 'we', which emphasizes [that] this console is for everyone. *Wii* can easily be remembered by people around the world, no matter what language they speak. No confusion. No need to abbreviate. Just *Wii*. *Wii* has a distinctive 'ii' spelling that symbolises both the

*unique controllers and the image of people gathering to play. And *Wii*, as a name and a console, brings something revolutionary to the world of videogames that sets it apart from the crowd. So that's *Wii*. But now Nintendo needs you. Because it's really not about you or me. It's about *Wii*. And together, *Wii* will change everything.*"

Naturally, gamers all across the Internet globe have expressed dismay at this new name for the upcoming console with its absurd 'gyro-sensing' controller that will finally give us a *Star Wars* game with wieldable light-sabre. Petitions are already online - thousands of meaningless signatures trying to change the name back to Revolution. Nintendo is sticking with the name and it is a long-term strategy that won't become apparent until much later when the name 'Wii' becomes as commonplace as 'iPod'. Time will tell, and Nintendo is set to unveil more at this year's Electronics Entertainment Expo (E3).





Yeah, it's a stupid name, but
that will hardly detract from
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when all hell
is breaking
loose?

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PlayStation 2



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SNIPPETS

YOUR ESSENTIAL INFO, NOW IN BITE-SIZED PORTIONS!

Another expansion has been announced for **IL-2 Sturmovik**. Players will be able to add the Pe-2 twin-engine bomber, one of Russia's most notorious aircraft from the era, to their fleet. The expansion will be sold and made available for download.



Simbin and THQ have announced that the fanatically detailed **GTR** series will be taken to the 360. In other words, expect some realistic racing with cutting-edge graphics on the world's best tracks in the most powerful cars.



SCI is rumoured to be in talks with Empire to buy the British publisher. The company bought Eidos last year and has seen a lot of financial success come from the recent **Tomb Raider: Legend**. Apparently SCI is specifically interested in Empire's casual game business.

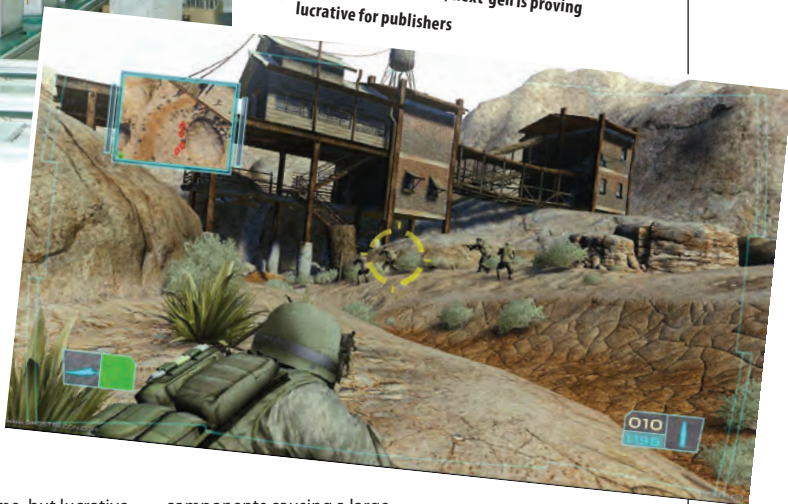


It appears to be a case of **Live and Let Die** for EA. Activision has been awarded the rights to develop games based on the James Bond franchise. The deal lasts through to 2014.



While manufacturing is placing pressure on console companies, next-gen is proving lucrative for publishers

NEXT-GEN WINS AND LOSSES



THE NEXT-GENERATION IS PROVING expensive for some, but lucrative for others. Microsoft recently announced the results for the first quarter of the year. The 360 has pushed revenues to \$1.06 billion, up from \$571 million for the same period last year. But the console still resulted in losses of around \$388 million, more than double the \$175 million recorded a year before. Microsoft expects revenues to be in the range of \$11 billion by the end of June. Part of this expectation comes from a recent deal with Chartered Semiconductor that will reduce the expensive CPU's size from 90nm to 65nm.

Sony is hoping on the same miniaturisation. It forecasts a whopping \$872 million loss for its game division by the end of the current fiscal year. But operating profits are actually up. Still, the company expects heavy losses when the PlayStation 3 is shipped, citing the CPU and Blu-Ray drive as the two

components causing a large part of the cost. It hopes that smaller, cheaper components will also be its salvation and Sony has an ambitious target of six million units sold by May 2007. That gives the company roughly half the time to achieve the same number Microsoft hopes to reach by the end of June. At the moment the PS3 is rumoured for a worldwide November launch at \$399.

Meanwhile, Ubisoft has started to reap the benefits of the next-generation. It posted better-than-expected financial results, bringing in €144 million instead of the project €130 million. Ubisoft's position as one of the top 360 publishers helped this, in particular **Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter**, which sold over 800,000 units at the time of writing and has become the fastest selling game on the platform.

BATTLEZONE HEADS FOR THE PSP

ARE YOU READY FOR another retro revival? Atari has announced that the classic **Battlezone** will be making its re-appearance on the PSP later this year. The game dynamic is pretty straightforward: players are in charge of lethal hover tanks and they have to blow up the enemy. The game will feature "photo realistic" environments, but best not forget that this will be on the PSP. Upgrades and various different types of tank make things more alluring, plus four-player WiFi battles will be possible.

Are there that many PSP owners that owned an Apple II machine in 1982? Yes, the game is nearly 25 years old, so in all likelihood this will be a spin-off towards a new generation. The action-orientated approach also leaves behind the changes brought to the series by Activision in the late nineties, but

there were the popular **Battlezone** games released on the N64. It appears Atari is continuing the currently-booming trend many other publishers are into of revamping old classics from their catalogs.



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METAL GEAR MOVIE

HIDE-CHAN RADIO, AN ONLINE radio cast centred on *Metal Gear Solid* series creator Hideo Kojima, recently had an interview with the designer in which he admitted that a *Metal Gear Solid* movie adaptation is in the works. "We're going to do it as a movie," he confirmed, "A Hollywood movie." He was reluctant to give specifics, saying instead, "I can't say when yet." What is known is that the film will be entirely in English. Speculation runs rife, as well as the all important question: how will a movie of a game, styled after

movies, fare? The *Metal Gear Solid* series has always drawn inspiration from Hollywood in terms of presentation, music and execution. Often the games have been referred to as 'Interactive Films' due to the high production values, graphical fidelity and penchant for explosions and slow-motion air-swims away from the explosions. Fans are excited though sceptical. The recent batch of game-movies has been less than stellar, and those who love Solid Snake a little too much are worried that the movie won't live up to the game.

EUPHORIA FOR INDY

THE UPCOMING INDIANA JONES game for the Xbox 360 (still untitled) will include an obscure new technology called 'euphoria'. NaturalMotion Ltd, creators of the technology, refers to it as a "behavioural-simulation engine."

"Imagine a swaying rope bridge. With euphoria in action, characters visibly attempt to balance themselves, their feet stumbling, their arms flailing, and their hands reaching for security as the unpredictable movements of the bridge threaten to send them plummeting to their doom. Perhaps they all survive. Perhaps they all fall. The use of euphoria means the action isn't scripted - it's simulated - so you'll never be able to

predict exactly what will happen, no matter how many times you've experienced a certain scenario," states the LucasArts press release.

Such interaction between various non-player characters and a reactive game environment has been a long time coming. Only now does the technology seem to be able to deliver. There is no release date for the new Indiana Jones game yet.



Expect even better fist fights in the next Indy game



GAME



It's a curious thing, leaving home. You may end up in another country, engaging in tactical espionage or being the last hope of saving the planet.

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Get swept off your feet when you leave home this June. Hot games this month for your PSP™ (PlayStation®Portable)

See in store for details.



Availability subject to change at distributors discretion or similar.



Warhammer fans rejoice! Relic and THQ are planning another expansion for **Dawn of War**. The new races, the Tau Empire and Neocrons, will debut in **Dark Crusade**, as well as a new meta-map single-player campaign where players have to control sections of the map for specific bonuses.

Considering **Daxter's** success, **Ratchet & Clank** has also been slated to make a move to the PSP. The game will be out in 2007.

EA has settled the overtime case with its employees. The publisher agreed to pay \$14.9 million to programmers who worked in various levels from February 2001 to February 2006.



TIBERIUM WARS ANNOUNCED

THIS WAS OBVIOUS WITH the release of the recent *Decade of Command & Conquer* pack, but EA made it official that a new *Command & Conquer* game is on the way. Aptly named *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars*, the series heads back to the original storyline, complete with the terrorist society NOD and its megalomaniac leader Kane. It is 2047, and the alien substance Tiberium is spreading across the Earth's surface to create a proverbial ice age. The GDI is there in force, trying to curb and control the mysterious crystal's expansion. Meanwhile NOD sees it as the opportunity to finally take over the world. Development honours lie with EA Los Angeles, the team created out of Westwood when

EA purchased the developer. Since then, a large part of the original *Command & Conquer* team has left, most notably to form the team that developed *Star Wars: Empire at War*. Thus, in terms of legacy authenticity, there isn't much that ties the Westwood original to the new game. But this has been the case since at least *Generals*, which was a financial success when it launched.

It's not clear if the game will have a new engine or the stalwart Sage, nor what can be expected. But the announcement promises a lot of classic *Command & Conquer* hardware and scenarios returning, including the devastating Ion storms that frequented the original.

FREE GAME OF THE MONTH

MU-CADE

URL: www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/mcd_e.html

GENRE: Japanese

SIZE: 6.3MB (On the DVD)

ABA GAMES, DEVELOPERS OF fine free obscure Eastern games, recently released what they themselves describe as "The Physics Centipede Invasion – Smashup waggly shmup, Mu-cade."

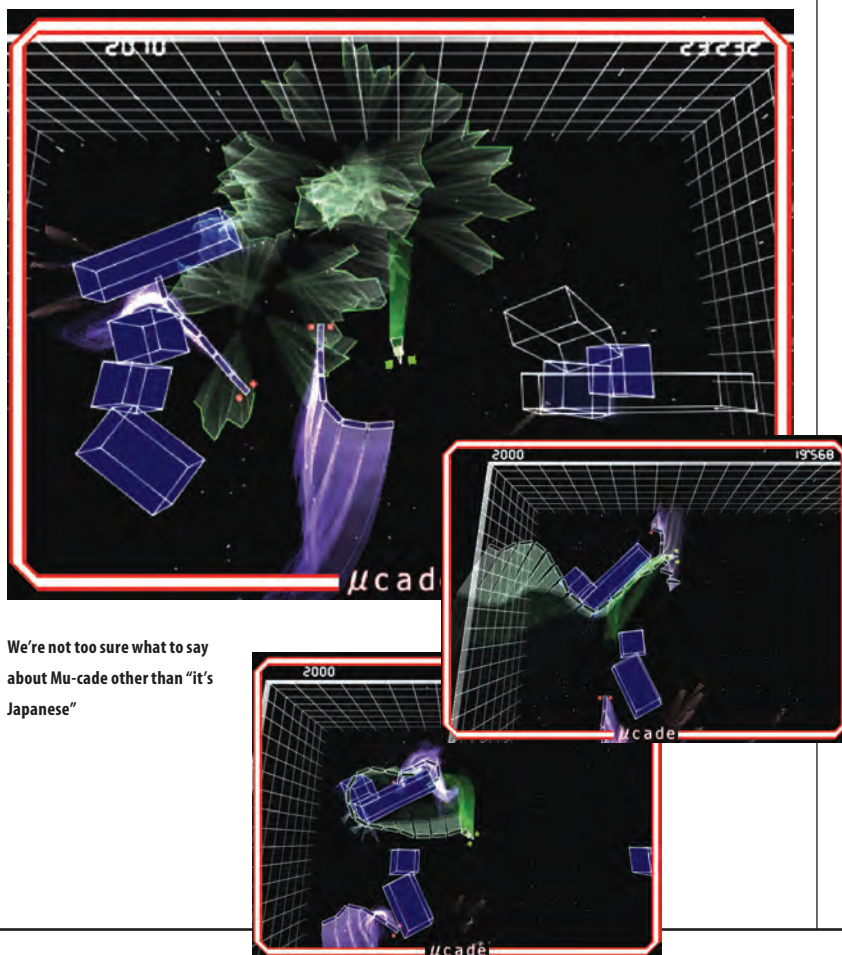
It's not supposed to make sense and despite the arbitrary name and nature, the game itself is pure unadulterated action bliss.

Essentially, you fly around inside a rectangle and shoot incoming worms and blocks. As you destroy the worms, their segments attach to you. You don't die from getting shot; instead you need to stay inside the rectangle. The bigger your body, the more likely that you'll get 'pushed' out by bullets. You can hit 'X' to explode your segments, but then you lose your score multiplier. If you get pushed out of the rectangle, you die instantly and it's game over.

The 'Z' key fires, and that's about all there is to it. The graphics are simple but striking, and the physics component of the game oddly solid despite everything being in wire frame. Mu-cade is the type of game that's easy to get into, but difficult to master.

For more advanced control, you can use 'WASD' to move and 'IJKL' to fire in a specific direction. When you explode your segments, you may get a temporary weapon upgrade and destroy all the bullets on-screen.

The NAG high score is 21,000. If you can beat that, head over to www.nag.co.za and post your high scores on the forums.



We're not too sure what to say about Mu-cade other than "it's Japanese"

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MODDING F.E.A.R.

THE 1.04 PATCH FOR Monolith's horror/action FPS *F.E.A.R.* adds in the much-appreciated MOD support. The patch lets people play mods created with the new SDK that has been released alongside the patch. You can download the patch and SDK from the official Website, along with the new dedicated server pack for those who host multiplayer servers. The official site also elaborates on what can be expected from the next patch, 1.05, which is set to arrive at the end of the month. A few new game-modes are expected to be incorporated. 'Control' sees two sides fighting over three control points. As long as a point is held a side builds up score, much like Domination from *Unreal Tournament*. 'Control All' has two teams fighting over five control points. The win is awarded to whoever has the most points at the end of the round, or whoever controls all five points at once. Publisher and rights-holder Vivendi recently announced plans for an Xbox 360 version, while developer Monolith - now owned by Warner Bros Interactive - is working on sequels to the game that will work on a similar level, but without the *F.E.A.R.* brand.



LUMINES COMING TO CELLPHONES

TO MOBILE GAMERS, GAMELOFT is no stranger. Having brought quality mobile versions of popular licenses to the diminutive screen of the cellphone, Gameloft is now setting its sights on *Lumines*. Tetsuya Mizuguchi's music puzzle game for the PSP will be translated to cellphone and will include 11 skins/musical tracks from the likes of Mondo Grosso and Andy Hunter. There are a total of six game modes along with a new arcade mode that was designed especially for mobile play. No longer just squares, additional shapes and a third colour mix things up with other new and innovative ideas. The game is being regarded as a quasi-sequel to the PSP hit, which was originally conveyed as a 'Tetris with Music'. In *Lumines*, players need to create squares by dropping smaller squares into a grid as a line passes from left to right - removing fully-formed larger squares advances the player's points. Enough points and the level progresses to the next - continuing the addictive gameplay. Gameloft has yet to comment if it's planning on taking more of Tetsuya's creations to the cellphone market, such as *Rez* or *Space Channel 5*.



BADGER HUNT

Ok. We messed up. We forgot the Badger last month. This job is a lot harder than you might think! To make up for it, this month we've hidden two badgers in the magazine. Find them and send your badger spotting to this address [ed@nag.co.za] with the subject line [June Badger].

BODYPAD

BodyPad is a simulator for fighting games on the PlayStation and Xbox consoles. It simulates physical interactions with fighting, dance or sport games by replacing the console controllers with the movements of your own hands and feet, allowing you to perform lethal jabs, hooks and kicks made by your virtual character on-screen.

www.bodypad.com



GAMEFACE

The **Nyko GameFace 360T** is a fully-customisable faceplate and skin kit for the Xbox 360. It comes with six pre-printed designs, 15 blank templates and a two-piece snap-together clear faceplate which houses the skins. Software can be downloaded so users can upload pictures, photos, drawings or their own artistic masterpieces into the program, print the design, and simply clip their customised faceplate onto their 360. www.nyko.com



BROTHERS IN ARMS 3 OFFICIAL

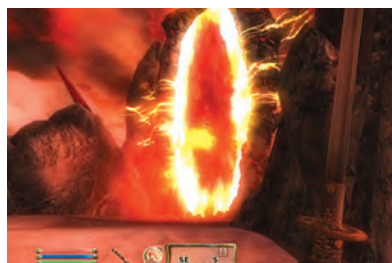
GEARBOX SOFTWARE AND UBISOFT have made it official that we can expect another *Brothers in Arms* game soon. The title was first mentioned when Sony made its PlayStation 3 line-up public at the 2005 Tokyo Game Show. Gearbox also announced then that it has licensed the Unreal Engine 3 for the next chapter. The most recent news also revealed that the game will be heading to the 360 as well. The third chapter will be called *Hell's Highway* and takes the 101st Airborne into Operation Market Garden, the massive campaign to capture bridges along the Rhine River. It resulted in the destruction of the British 1st Airborne Division and is regarded as the

last major German victory against the Allied forces. Players will continue the story of Joe Baker and the rest of the team as they make their way through the events of this massive assault. Gearbox CEO Randy Pitchford has already promised before that the next *Brothers in Arms* game will be a paradigm shift in terms of the series, and it is public knowledge that *Hell's Highway* will boast a new multiplayer component. Ideally a major change would be more freedom of movement, but a high-level of level destruction is pretty likely. Unfortunately fans will have to wait until 2007 or at the very least until the PlayStation 3 launches, before it will be released.

OBLIVION BOASTS RECORD SALES

ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION has translated into a major success for Bethesda and Take 2. Arriving four years after *Morrowind*, *Oblivion* took the world by storm, partly thanks to being released at the right time. There is no disputing one of *Oblivion's* main attractions: its cutting-edge graphics. This certainly boosted sales in the PC market. The game became the top selling PC title in the US, while its collector's edition took the second spot. By the end of that week *Oblivion* was responsible for 13% of all PC sales that week - more than four times than any other title managed. It was the second-best selling PC title in March, moving 174,400 units.

But the real success came on the 360. *Morrowind* has been a big seller on the Xbox and *Oblivion* represented the next-generation of RPGs. As such, owners of the console flocked to its release and were highly satisfied with the results. *Oblivion* was the third most sold console title in March, moving over 357,000 units. It also took the honour of being the fastest selling 360 title to date, though



Advanced Warfighter soon took that spot. That's just in the US; the game entered the charts at number one in the UK, Germany and France.

So where does the game head next? *Morrowind* remained a constant seller for Bethesda, so the developer hopes to get the same mileage out of *Oblivion*. This has started in small form with content being sold to players. Recently the team released a new horse for the game that could be bought for \$2.00. A large part of the community complained about this, but the horse also had tens of thousands of downloads, according to Bethesda. So this revenue stream is likely to help the game, at least until a full expansion is announced.

TAKE-TWO GETS GHOST RIDER

WITH THE INTERNATIONAL RELEASE of the *Ghost Rider* movie just around the corner, Take-Two has announced a console and handheld game based on the movie. The game will be a third-person action title based on both the comic books and the inspired movie, and is expected to be released simultaneously with the movie. *Ghost Rider* follows the characters and motorcycles from the comic books and movies, putting gamers in the middle of an immersive, supernatural world. A blend of hand-to-hand combat and high-speed motorcycle action forms the core of the game. "Ghost Rider is one of Marvel Comics' most successful comic book franchises and we're thrilled to bring this beloved series to a broader audience," said Christoph Hartmann, Managing Director of 2K Games. "The videogame will build upon the popular elements from the *Ghost Rider* franchise and intertwine its thrilling action and original, compelling content into a gaming experience fans will love." "Marvel is excited about the upcoming *Ghost Rider* videogame," said Ames Kirshen, Vice President, Interactive at Marvel Entertainment. "2K Games is creating an innovative game that showcases a combination of amazing hand-to-hand combat and motorcycle action, intertwined with compelling third-person play that offer gamers a truly unique and diverse gameplay experience."



CAPTION OF THE MONTH

EVERY MONTH WE'LL CHOOSE a boring, odd or peculiar screenshot from any random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better [funny] caption. The winner will get a free game from Vivendi Universal Games. Send your captions to [ed@nag.co.za] with the subject [June Caption].



JUNE CONTEST

NAG'S LAME

ATTEMPT:

"We're the Knights of the Square Tables, we'll seat you whenever we're able."



MAY WINNER

"Mike was always told you are what you eat, but this time he took it literally!"

— Kyle Everett

RULES: (1) If you don't use the correct subject line, your mail will be automatically filtered by our spam software and deleted. (2) If you think sending in 20 captions for the same screenshot is how you want to play the system, then put them all in the same mail or we'll keep the top one and delete the rest. You probably won't win anyway because you can't follow simple instructions. And people who can't follow simple instructions don't deserve to win things. (3) Obey all posted speed limits. (4) Never run with scissors. (5) There is no spoon.

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SEAGATE BARRACUDA 7200.10

SEAGATE THIS MONTH ASTOUNDED the world with its first in a new range of Barracuda 7200.10 desktop drives, using the company's perpendicular storage technology which it introduced last year in its mobile storage range.

Hard drives store data in the physical form of microscopic magnetic particles, which the heads then arrange on the platter itself to store the necessary bits of information. Traditionally, these particles are arranged laying flat on the surface of the platter, but last year Seagate realised this was a waste of potentially valuable platter space, and rearranged these particles vertically, like skyscrapers in a modern city. This has become known as perpendicular recording technology.

This new method has yielded phenomenal results in its latest Barracuda desktop drive. Using the exact same number of platters and heads as the old Barracuda drive, four and eight respectively, the new 7200.10 drives have



increased aerial density (the amount of data that can be stored per square inch of platter) by an astounding 50%. The company's first generation of 7200.10 drives scales from 200GB right up to 750GB, on a single, normally-proportioned drive!

The drives also feature a 16MB buffer, and support a technique called staggered spin-up which allows the hardware itself to power-up multiple drives in a single system one by one to avoid a sudden, PSU-wilting power-drain at boot time.



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GUILD WARS FACTIONS KEYSET

Designed specifically for **Guild Wars Factions** online play, the Limited Edition Keyset features 56 dedicated action keys, 12 menus and 12 quick access remote keys. The key set will also be compatible for use with Guild Wars. www.zboard.com

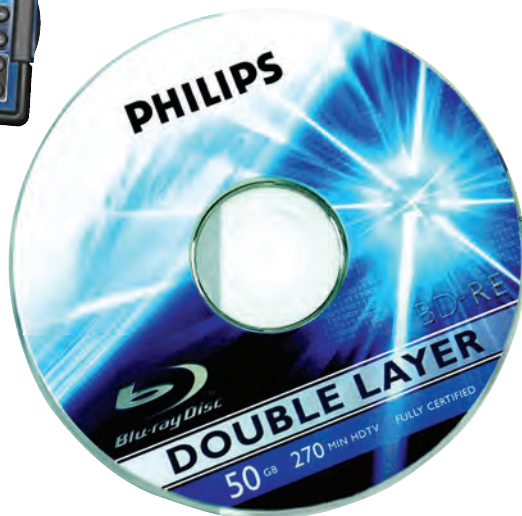
NOVOTABLE

Novotable is an interactive games table that incorporates a 32-inch LCD touch-screen, PC and games console. It has a built in sub, arcade controllers which can rotate 180° and Bluetooth functionality, which will allow you to download images from your cellphone or connect to the Internet. www.novotable.com



AUTO ASSAULT TRADING CARD GAME

The **Auto Assault Trading Card Game** is a digital trading card game based on NCsoft's MMO game, Auto Assault. The game is sold in booster packs, 26-pack boxes, and Human, Biomek and Mutant starter decks. There will also be a monthly tournament series that leads up to the Auto Assault TCG World Championships, which will take place at Gen Con in Indianapolis, in August. www.autoassaulttcg.com



FORMAT WARS TO DECIDE CONSOLES' FATES?

WEDBUSH MORGAN SECURITIES HAS released a massive report, stating that the next-generation's console war will be decided not by the consoles, but their disc drives. One of the leading features in the PlayStation 3 will be its Blu-Ray Disc player, one of the competing formats to replace the DVD. Microsoft opted to support HD-DVD, Toshiba's standard, though the current 360 doesn't have the drive yet. The war over which format will rule has been given to the consumers and all the major players are playing the waiting game. While analysts favour Blu-Ray, HD-DVD carries its own advantages, including few DRM measures and no regions. The movie studios have by-and-large not sided with either format, opting to wait as well.

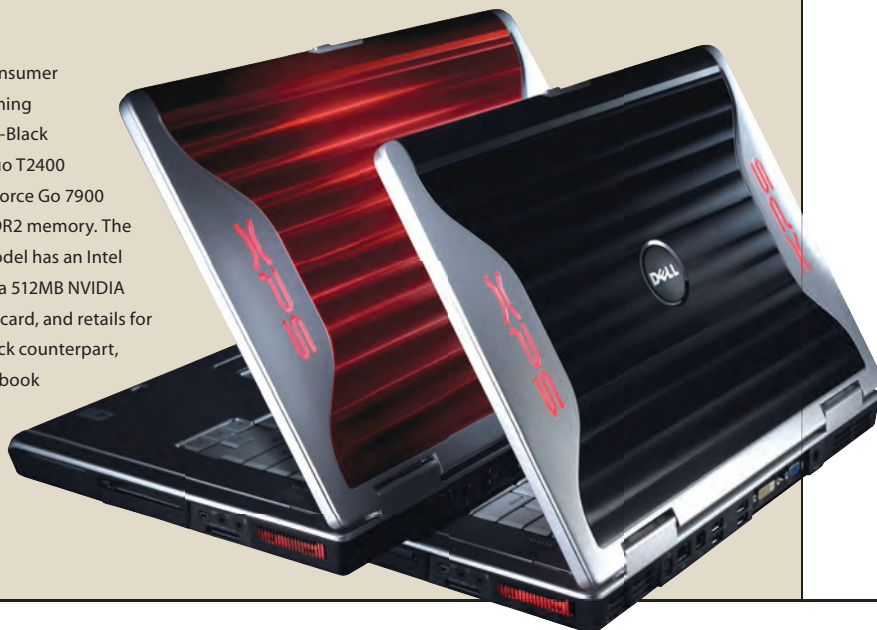
As such, WMS expects that the console market will be dictated by this war. It expects Microsoft to maintain the lead in the next two years, but then Sony will return to the lead.

"We expect the dominant console at the end of the next cycle to be the Sony PlayStation 3, primarily due to our assessment that Sony will win the high-definition DVD format war," the report explains. "However, we expect Microsoft's Xbox 360 to enjoy a first mover advantage for the next two years, capturing approximately 42 percent of US and European combined next-generation hardware unit sales through 2007."

This depends on the popularity of the new formats. Currently players for the new formats are significantly more expensive than current DVD models. The popularity of the new formats also depends on the growth of high-definition television. This is still a relatively expensive technology. If crucial to the growth of the new formats, it could mean that things are likely to take a bit longer than the usual five years a console's primary cycle lasts.

DELL XPS M1710

DELL HAS LAUNCHED ITS fastest consumer notebook aimed at the gaming market. The XPS M1710 Metallic-Black model features an Intel Core Duo T2400 processor, a 256MB NVIDIA GeForce Go 7900 GS graphics card and 1GB of DDR2 memory. The Special Edition Formula Red model has an Intel Core Duo T2500 processor and a 512MB NVIDIA GeForce Go 7900 GTX graphics card, and retails for \$800 more than its metallic-black counterpart, at \$3,400. Each XPS M1710 notebook features an illuminated XPS touchpad and adjustable 16-colour perimeter lighting, as well as a magnesium-alloy reinforced RoadReady chassis. www.dell.com



CHARTS

PC GAMES

#	Title
1	Sims 2: Open For Business
2	Tomb Raider: Legend
3	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
4	CSI 3: Dimensions Of Murder
5	The Godfather
6	Juiced
7	Sims 2
8	Rugby 2006
9	Sims 2: Nightlife
10	Lord Of The Rings: Battle For Middle-earth II
11	Splinter Cell Trilogy Pack
12	Playboy: The Mansion Gold Exclusive
13	Age Of Empires 3 Collectors Edition
14	Guild Wars
15	Sims Deluxe Edition

PLAYSTATION 2

#	Title
1	Tomb Raider: Legend
2	Rugby 2006
3	Toca Race Driver 3
4	Punisher
5	Area 51
6	Destroy All Humans
7	Tekken 5 Platinum
8	Fantastic Four
9	Burnout 3 Takedown Platinum
10	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
11	Black
12	LA Rush
13	Need For Speed: Most Wanted Black Edition
14	FIFA Street 2
15	Ultimate Spider-Man

PSP

#	Title
1	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories
2	Splinter Cell: Essentials
3	FIFA Street 2
4	Sims 2
5	Need For Speed: Most Wanted
6	Lemmings
7	Pink Paradise Table Dance and Striptease (Adult UMD)
8	ATV Offroad Blazin Fury
9	Desperately Sexy Housewives (Adult UMD)
10	WWE: Smackdown vs Raw 2006
11	Fight Night: Round 3
12	Need For Speed: Underground Rivals
13	SSX4 On Tour
14	Street Fighter Alpha Max
15	Harry Potter & The Goblet Of Fire

MORPHVOX VOICE SOFTWARE

MorphVOX is a Windows PC tool that can change the voice of a person online and is ideal for use by gamers who want to role-play a character of a different gender or species. The software can be controlled by any keystroke, mouse click or joystick trigger while a game is running. Features include push-to-talk, sound effects and audio alarms with additional themed voices available for free download. MorphVOX is compatible with all online games as well as most chat programs.

www.screamingbee.com



XSATA

The **XSATA** is a plug-and-play device from Datel which allows you to free up hard drive space on your Xbox 360. Using your Xbox 360 file manager software, you can transfer content, such as demos and game saves, to your PC and then back again. Once the data is on your PC, you can e-mail anything that's not locked to your machine or Live account, for your friends to use on their own consoles.

www.datel.co.uk

PROFESSIONAL GAMING KEYBOARD

After nine months of research and testing, the **SteelKeys 6G professional gaming keyboard** is ready for release to hardcore gamers. The package includes an extra neutral grey colour key set for all standard-sized keys. This is said to aid visual navigation while playing.

www.steelseries.com

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My Flash MMC Mobile Card

The A-DATA Reduced-Size Multi Media Card TM is a universal low cost data storage and communication media. It is designed to cover a wide range of applications, such as cameras, smart phones, electronic toys, PDAs, digital recorders, MP3 players, pagers, cell phone and more.



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RELEASE: Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble (PSP) Date TBA
RELEASE: Dance Factory (PS2) Date TBA
RELEASE: LMA Manager 2006 (PC) Date TBA
RELEASE: Dynasty Warriors Volume 2 (PSP) Date TBA
RELEASE: Samurai Warriors: State of War (PSP) Date TBA



6

RELEASE: Def Jam Fight for NY: The Takeover (PSP) ◀

7

RELEASE: Half-Life 2: Episode One ▲
RELEASE: Half-Life 2 Platinum Edition (PC)

13

RELEASE: Field Commander (PSP)

14

RELEASE: The Movies: Stunts and Effects (PC)
RELEASE: 25 to Life (PC)
RELEASE: X-Men: The Official Game (PC) ▶

19

RELEASE: State of Emergency 2 (PS2)

21

RELEASE: 25 to Life (PS2)
RELEASE: Xplosiv - Resident Evil 3 (PC)

26

RELEASE: Juiced Eliminator (PSP)

28

RELEASE: Dangerous Waters (PC) Date TBA
RELEASE: Supreme Ruler (PC) Date TBA
RELEASE: Evolution GT (PC, PS2) Date TBA



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RELEASE: Hitman: Blood Money (PC) ▼
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RELEASE: Samurai Shodown V (PS2)
RELEASE: Outrun 2006: Coast to Coast (PC)
RELEASE: Total War Eras (PC)



2

RELEASE: Popolocrois (PSP)

9

RELEASE: Tourist Trophy (PS2)
Only R419.95 (until 30 June) @ www.kalahari.net
RELEASE: Ys: The Ark of Napishtim (PSP) ►
RELEASE: Metal Gear AcId 2

16

RELEASE: Cars (PC)
RELEASE: Darkstar One (PC)
RELEASE: Cars (PS2, PSP)
EVENT: Organised Chaos LAN, Cape Town (www.langames.co.za)
EVENT: OMG LAN Party, 16 - 18 June (www.omg.co.za)



22

RELEASE: Talkman (PSP)
RELEASE: Street Supremacy (PSP)
RELEASE: Monster Hunter: Freedom (PSP)

23

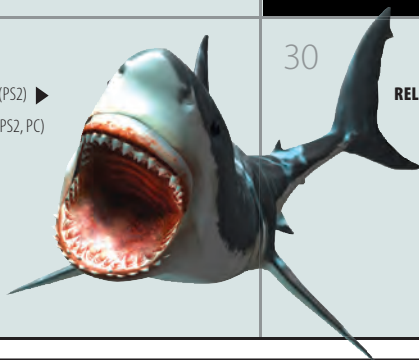
RELEASE: Super Monkey Ball Adventure (PS2, PSP)

24/25

RELEASE: Untold Legends 2 (PSP) Date TBA
RELEASE: Astonisha Story (PSP) Date TBA
RELEASE: Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror (PSP) Date TBA
RELEASE: Call of Duty: Finest Hour (PS2) Date TBA
RELEASE: Army Men: Major Malfunction (PS2) Date TBA
RELEASE: Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War (PC) Date TBA
RELEASE: WWE Smackdown vs Raw 2006 (PS2) Date TBA ▼

29

RELEASE: Jaws Unleashed (PS2) ►
RELEASE: Over the Hedge (PS2, PC)



30

RELEASE: Titan Quest (PC)



Now available at





MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS PROTECTION MONEY

By Miktar Dracon

OKAY, SO EVERYONE KNOWS about StarForce, right? For those of you not up to speed, StarForce is a software copy protection solution by Russian developer Protection Technology, which licensed it from CD-Cops.

Without getting too technical, StarForce installs a device driver on your machine which may or may not damage your system. A lot of users have said that StarForce protection causes reboots, lockups and even complete crashes, which require a reinstallation of Windows. StarForce has responded to these claims saying they're false, lies and just 'make believe' to drag StarForce's name through the mud.

StarForce lambastes critics of its anti-piracy software, calling them "Members of the Russian Mafia." Anyone else hearing a cuckoo clock in the background?

Most gamers have come across StarForce in some form or another, especially if they've purchased any recent Ubisoft games. StarForce is easy to recognise. You have to reboot your machine right after installing a new game. This means StarForce is loading a new device driver, and most gamers aren't happy with this.

StarForce, as a company, honestly believes that it is providing a perfect anti-piracy solution. StarForce claims that the lack of 'cracks' for StarForce protected games is proof of this.

Everyone knows that they're talking utter nonsense of course.

Every single StarForce-protected game out right now can be copied, cracked and pirated easily. You don't even have to try very hard. Any idiot can do it.

So here comes the question I would like to ask of StarForce (and actually have, reply still pending):

"What exactly are publishers/developers paying StarForce for?"

Think about it: a company spends a large sum to purchase the StarForce anti-piracy protection, yet within minutes of a game going gold there are pirated versions on the Internet along with methods of circumventing StarForce. So what did that

STARFORCE
CONTINUES TO
APPEAR AND
GAMES USING
THE CRIPPLING
ANTI-PIRACY
MEASURE, TO
EFFECTIVELY
ANNOY THOSE
WHO HAVE
BOUGHT THE
GAME LEGALLY,
KEEP BEING
PUBLISHED

company just spend all that money on?

The answer is: nothing!

Ubisoft and other publishers, along with developers, are essentially paying 'protection money' to a company more aligned with the Russian Mafia, especially at face-value. This isn't some idle ranting from a nobody either. Both *CNET* and *Boing Boing* (official blog of *Wired* magazine) have called StarForce malware – software that is malicious and can allow Trojans and other malware into the system (since it grants ring 0 access).

Ubisoft recently ran a poll on its Website, the outcome of which was very predictable. All users were against the use of StarForce.

But StarForce continues to appear and games using the crippling anti-piracy measure, to effectively annoy those who have bought the game legally, keep being published. *Blazing Angels*, for example, refuses to work on most DVD-drives, yet pirated copies work 100% - no mess no fuss.

So, StarForce is there to treat the paying customers like thieves while the pirates can play the games without hassle.

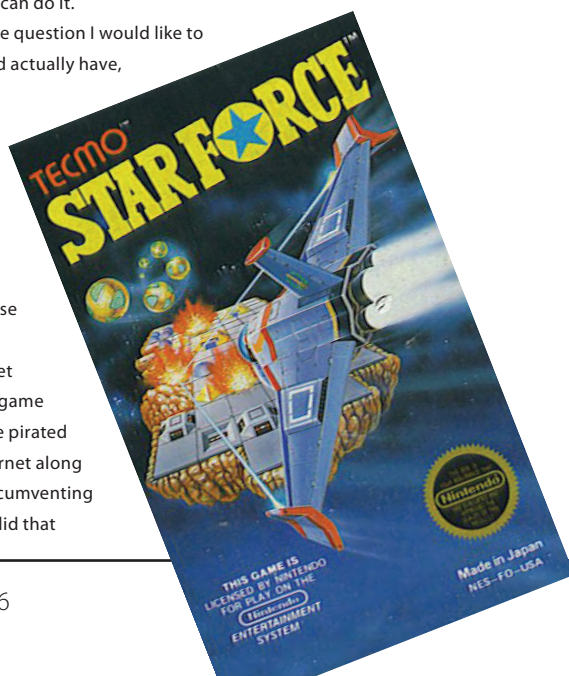
Naturally, this idea doesn't sit well with most gamers. In fact, the *Boycott StarForce* (<http://www.glop.org/starforce/>) Website contains information on how to detect if a game uses StarForce, as well as how to remove it. It also contains a list of known StarForce protected games.

Personally, I'm against piracy. Not only do I believe in paying the developers for their hard work, but I believe purchasing games gives you a deeper appreciation for them. StarForce, however, often forces my hand and makes me not purchase games that I'd really like to play. Instead, I'll borrow the game from a friend once he's done with it and, yes, I'll remove the StarForce protection from the game before playing it.

"The purpose of copy protection is not making the game uncrackable - it is impossible. After several months of sails [sic] even we recommend the publishers to release patches that remove the copy protection just to make the gameplay more comfortable to [sic] the customers." – StarForce on its forums.

Since StarForce doesn't prevent piracy and StarForce recommends that companies remove it from their games after a while, what is the point of having it in the first place? **NAG**

Ubisoft, reacting to a class action lawsuit, has decided to cancel its partnership with Starforce.





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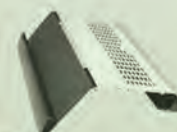


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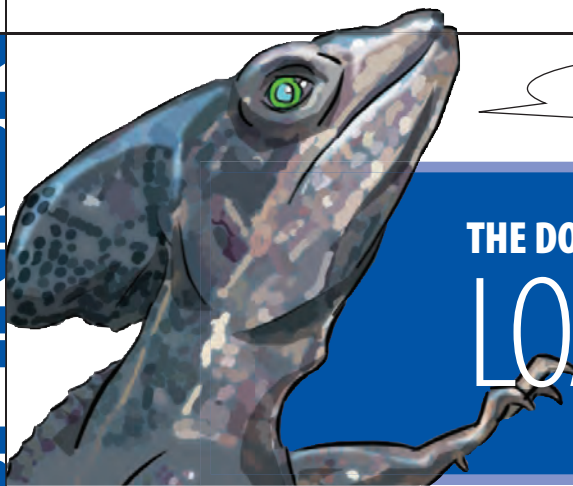
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YA RLY

THE DOMAIN OF THE BASILISK

LOADING THE CANON

By Anton Lines

IN MY OPINION THE best *Indiana Jones* movie wasn't *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Last Crusade* or *The Temple of Doom*. In fact, it wasn't even a movie. Far from the silver screens of Hollywood, the most engaging appearance Herr Jones ever made was in a revolutionary little adventure game by Lucasarts, called *The Fate of Atlantis*. What this game did, aside from providing hours and hours of fun, was to lay the foundation for the possibility of interactive entertainment as a literary art form.

I'm currently majoring in English Literature. I'm not proud of it – the idea of professional literary studies appals me. It's a pretentious way for a bunch of glorified fan-boys to make a living off other artists' work. God knows I wish I could tell people I was in medicine or particle physics, but nevertheless, a student of the English canon I am; albeit only because there are no decent undergraduate creative writing courses anywhere in this country.

Anyway, I digress. Back to the point: one of the slightly less nauseating pursuits of literary theory is to trace the history of literary forms. The timeline differs depending on which theorist you follow, but essentially we begin with the oral storytelling traditions of primitive human civilisations move through forms of poetry, the stage play, and the birth and growth of the novel. Following this, we have the motion picture, and that's where the conventional timelines stop. These parochial academics have not yet discovered the videogame. Our current situation can be compared

UNLIKE
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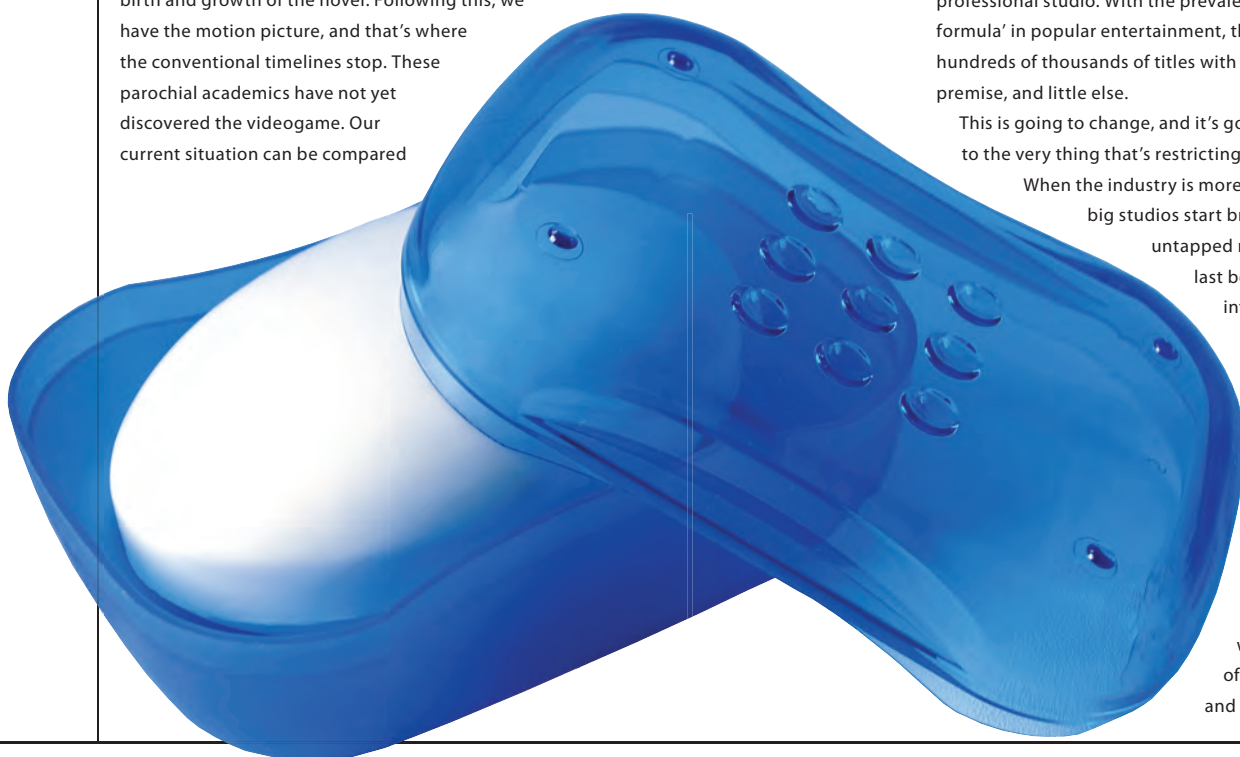
to the critical reception of 1920's cinema. We are, right now, standing at the forefront of the next stage in the evolution of literature, and it may only be recognised by the institutions half a century later.

There is, however, one problem with this little hypothesis of mine. Unlike poetry, novels or films, there don't seem to be any games developed for the purpose of 'saying something' – that is, getting some sort of important message across to their players. Games seem to be a wholly commercial enterprise; escapism for profit, certainly not what one would want to call literature in the academic sense. I think, firstly, that there's a good reason for this, and, secondly, that we can expect it to change.

There are 'art-house films' but not 'art-house games' because, on a basic level, anybody with a camera can make a film, while not anybody with a computer can develop a game. Because of the very specific skills required in game production, not to mention the time and money involved, games are the almost-exclusive preserves of large development houses. These professional studios have one thing in mind – staying in business – and the few independent developers have another – getting hired by a professional studio. With the prevalence of the 'Hollywood formula' in popular entertainment, this means we get hundreds of thousands of titles with 'action' as their sole premise, and little else.

This is going to change, and it's going to change thanks to the very thing that's restricting it now: capitalism.

When the industry is more established and the big studios start branching into previously untapped markets, there will at last be games directed at us intellectuals; games with properly-thought-out storylines and real characters. When this happens, artists with something meaningful to say will begin to explore interactive entertainment, and eventually we'll end up with games of the calibre of *Fight Club*, *Dr Strangelove* and *Life is Beautiful*. **NAG**





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DAMMIT

WHAT LIES BENEATH...?

By Megan Hughes

A FEW DAYS AGO, OUT of sheer and utter boredom, due to a lack of absolutely anything to do (it was raining in Durban), I decided to clean my computer. Truth be told, my keyboard was looking a tad grimy, having changed colour once again from that awful standard-issue white-grey colour to a weird shade of sandy yellow-brown, and it was definitely long overdue for a good scrubbing down (and probably in great need of disinfecting too, but we won't go into that just yet).

So, after turning off the computer and unplugging the offending piece of equipment, I sat down on my bed and proceeded to pull out each one of the keys, but this turned out not to be the brightest idea. I later discovered that even though I can type without looking at the keyboard, I had no idea where some of the keys actually belonged. I was somewhat surprised, and delighted at the brief boredom relief that was offered. However, when a smallish brown spider, about the size of my thumb, jumped out from under my function keys, where it had apparently been living quite comfortably for some time, I got the fright of my life. The spider, long legged and terrified, ran around the room for a while, stopping momentarily while considering jumping back under the function keys. It eventually crawled up my radio wires and is probably happy in its new home in the speakers.

Anyway, an hour or so later I had finished scraping as much dust, and other unidentifiable things mixed in with it, from under the key spaces, washed as much of said brown-yellow off the keys, and spent at least ten minutes trying to determine in which order the keys next to the spacebar actually fitted. Now I had a relatively clean, cream-coloured keyboard (as close to standard-issue colour as I could possibly get), but I was still very bored.

CONTAMINATED KEYBOARDS ARE NOW SEEN AS THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE SPREAD OF SOME LIFE THREATENING BLOODSTREAM INFECTIONS SUCH AS VRE AND MRSA (WHAT THESE ARE, I HAVE NO IDEA, BUT IF THE NAME IS LONG ENOUGH TO WARRANT AN ACRONYM, IT'S PROBABLY WORTH AVOIDING)

It was then that a bright idea flashed across my mind's eye, but being a little slow on the uptake I missed it. The second, relatively, good idea that my mind surprised me with, I took hold of and ran with: let's find out exactly how dirty that keyboard actually was. So I started up my computer again, went to bake cookies, and then connected to the Net to do a little research.

A Google search produced a few interesting sites, including one that claimed that "... while typing, your hands may be surrounded by 10 million germs." The same article also reported that "... telephones had the highest levels of germs, followed by desks, water fountain handles, microwave door handles and computer keyboards." Okay, so it's dirty, but are these germs even dangerous to us?

Pretty dangerous, apparently. According to *engadget.com*, hospitals in America have started noticing that keyboard-bearing devices (of which there happen to be a lot of in hospitals) pose a challenge for infection control. In fact, contaminated keyboards are now seen as the root cause of the spread of some life threatening bloodstream infections such as VRE and MRSA (what these are, I have no idea, but if the name is long enough to warrant an acronym, it's probably worth avoiding).

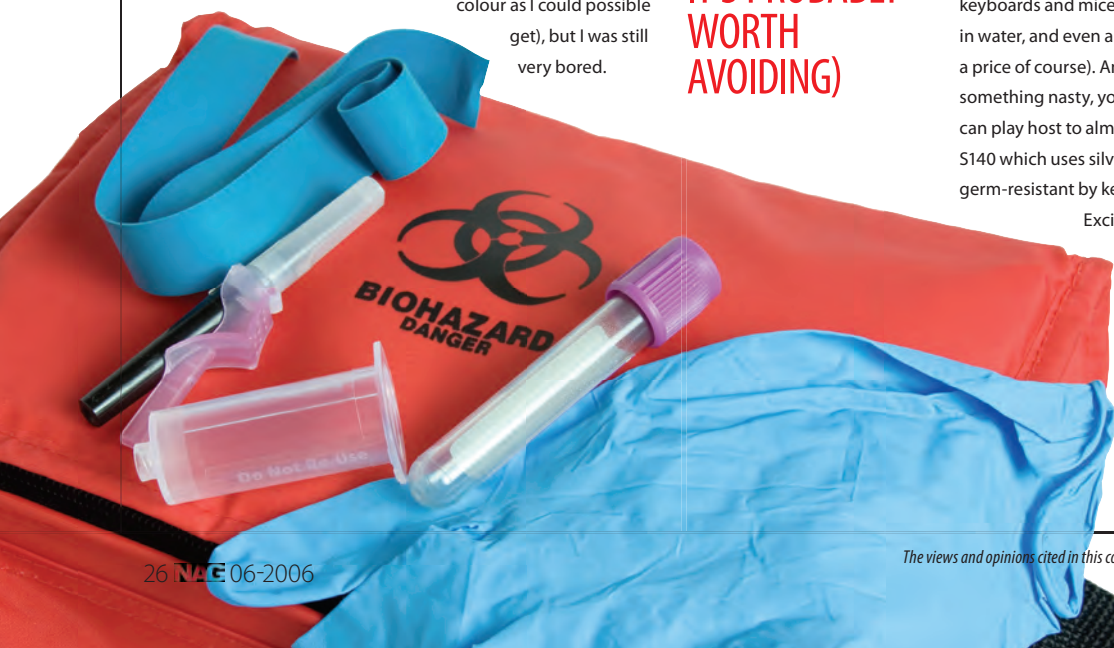
But what about the average keyboard which is not surrounded by a bunch of half-dying sick people? If you're the only person using that keyboard, then the germs on it are your own and you're probably immune to them anyway. But it's still wise to clean your computer every six months or so or at least keep up a good hygiene regime (like washing your hands before and after using your beloved, and sometimes hated, machine).

You could also get your hands on various versions of 'washable' keyboards and mice, which are sealed to allow full immersion in water, and even antibacterial solutions and disinfectants (at a price of course). And if you're really worried about catching something nasty, you could even upgrade your cellphone, which can play host to almost 2,500 germs, to the new Samsung SCH-S140 which uses silver-nanotechnology that leaves it "... relatively germ-resistant by keeping the phone sterile and deodorised."

Exciting... **NAG**

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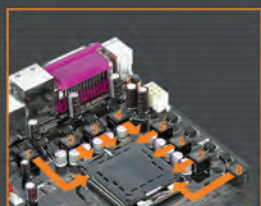


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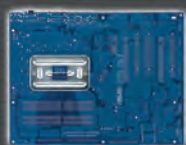
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KINGPIN SAME OLD...

By Michael James

THIS IS GOING TO be about conventions and gaming and why we're still shooting barrels and exploring dark gloomy corridors – the real story.

A brief discussion in the office the other day highlighted that many games are developed by gamers, so therefore they draw on their gaming history when doing the creative bits. Think about all the things you'd add to a shooter if you were in charge of design. Would the urge to add a corridor and a destructible box be something you'd be able to overcome? Perhaps you'd include a set of weapons (increasing in power as the player went along). Why not rather give the player the most powerful weapon at the beginning of the game? Is the lure of a better weapon on some distant level the only thing keeping gamers interested these days? Hopefully not or we're a lot dumber than we think we are.

I suppose that once you start developing games you'll quickly learn all about what you can't do instead of what you can do, with limitations based on time, budget and 'what works' ruling the process. This frustration would inevitably lead to reluctant submission to the rules of game development until all you're left with is toxic barrels and pools of lava. Even though we have powerful video acceleration at our fingertips, we're still playing the same games. Soon we'll have physics acceleration cards in our machines. What will this mean for gamers? More boxes to shoot I expect, but just look at how they fly apart now, each individual splinter is accounted for and accountable. Look at how that piece of wood over there went flying down the corridor and made the dust fly up on the ground over there. Just look at that dust particle effect. Wow! We'll all be impressed and somehow forget that we're still in a corridor shooting at a box. I guess

SO, WE'RE STILL
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we're being shown these incredible effects using boxes and dust so that by the time the game is released, we're expecting that they'll somehow use physics in a natural way that'll actually change the way we play our games. Then again, isn't it eternal optimism that keeps us going at this little hobby of ours?

So, we're still stuck in a paradigm that is limited by technology, time, money and more clearly, previous experience. While these elements probably work well together when designing an airplane, this pattern of thinking shouldn't apply to everything – especially games. The message: we need more 'real' in games.

Still on the same topic, in the office we were discussing the new *Command and Conquer* and speculated on how cool it might be that when a tank arrives back at base it parks and the crew get out and head towards the mess hall. Hours later, should you be inclined to check, under a spotlight in the evening, you'll find them all outside cleaning their tank, readying it for the next mission. If you look at a recent example like *Battle for Middle-earth II*, consider that there are no people on the ships, no struggling bodies in the ensuing battle wreckage. Wouldn't it be fun to see a few sailors clinging to planks while others are being taken by sharks? Or how about seagulls found much later, after all the bodies have gone and the ship has sunk, circling the area and picking at the pieces. I don't expect you'll even need to use any real raw processing power to make a few tiny seagulls circle a few bits of your enemy in the sea – all that stuff was onscreen a few minutes ago, and back then you were shooting at it and watching it explode. So while it's great that you can shoot a chain and drop a few planks onto the unsuspecting enemy soldiers in *Far Cry*, you have to wonder if this is the best we're going to ever see. I know this topic has been discussed to death in broader terms and I'm not covering any new ground except for the details – more detailed games can only be a good thing, right?

The point: developers need to think about the life that's going on around games and take note that tank crews don't sit in their tanks, clustered around all the other tanks in the base, until told to do something different. The best part of all of this is that it won't even drop your framerate by a single digit. **NAG**

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Developer: Arkane Studios Publisher: Ubisoft Distributor: Megarom [011] 234-2680 Platform: PC Genre: Action RPG Release: Q2 2006

Dark Messiah

MIGHT AND MAGIC


ARKANE STUDIOS, KNOWN FOR ONLY ONE GAME, HAS TAKEN ON THE CHALLENGE TO REVIVE THE MIGHT & MAGIC SERIES FOR UBISOFT. EXCEPT IN THIS CASE, 'REVIVAL' MEANS STARTING FROM SCRATCH AND BRINGING A NEW WAY OF THINKING TO RPGS, FIRST-PERSON GAMES AND WHAT ONE COULD DO WITH A BIT OF PHYSICS.

THE POWER OF ONE

IT'S LITTLE SURPRISE THAT FPS is so synonymous with the first-person perspective that even other contemporaries such as flight simulators or the internal views of racing titles rarely enter the minds of gamers when the moniker is mentioned. The genre usurped the entire idea of a first-person perspective, so much so that anything that doesn't involve the back of a character's head usually had a gun protruding from the player... Use of a first-person in fantasy settings, which is more reliant on the basic but intuitive pull of a bow and swing of a sword or axe, never qualified. Basically, first-person combat with melee weapons has been something developers have been avoiding.

So why is Arkane Studios, known for only one other game, attempting this no-go principle on a game that hopes to revive the Might & Magic series? After Ubisoft picked up the Might & Magic rights from 3DO for a steal in 2003, it's been looking for ways to bring back one of the most loved PC-based RPG universes. That's in the loosest sense of the word – Might & Magic has changed its location planet several times through the series. So at least a revival won't involve fans that closely scrutinise the accuracy of the new world, Ashan, to where the series has been before. In fact, when you look at both the Might & Magic and Heroes of M&M lines, the back stories and characters range widely. In the highly tactical arena of Heroes, developer Nival certainly has a specific challenge to meet. But Arkane has picked up the gauntlet for a wholly different side to the revival.





Might & Magic isn't famous for its storyline, but how the game played and the options it presented to the player. Party-based, the series has always maintained a first-person perspective. The initial title, released in 1986 on the Apple II, resembled the original Bard's Tale. Players progressed from screen to screen in a first-person view, while combat was turn-based. Later, in Might & Magic XI, the series adopted a scrolling first-person environment similar to Doom. But things took a turn for the worse as well and many fans would lose faith in the series from this point onwards, thanks to 3DO's increasing and desperate attempts to solve its financial woes through the franchise. It all ended at Might & Magic 9, a game most fans didn't even play. Even Arkane's CEO, Rapheal Colantonio, admits that he never ventured past the sixth game.

Arkane's involvement is due to its street cred. In 1999, Colantonio approached Looking Glass founder Paul Neurath with the idea of making Ultima Underworld 3, a series well-known for its first-person fantasy role-playing. Even though Neurath was very excited about the idea, it never came to fruition. That didn't stop Colantonio who, with a four-man team, went on to create Arx Fatalis, an unofficial homage to UU. Fans of the fantasy action genre quickly caught on to it and the title became a cult hit, even though it had many bugs and issues. It was very innovative and presented an immersion into a fantasy world that wasn't seen before.

Then Valve appeared on the scene. Some of the developer's staff met the Arx Fatalis guys as they were demonstrating the Xbox version at E3. The staffers promptly invited Colantonio and his crew to come and watch a demonstration of the then un-revealed Source engine. When Arkane saw it in action, it immediately started dealing with Valve to license the engine. The Valve staffers, on the other hand, were big fans of Arx Fatalis, and founder Gabe Newell admitted a deep fondness for the Might & Magic series, so a deal was quickly struck and Arkane created a tech demo. When Ubisoft saw this demo, it approached Arkane to develop the new Might & Magic. Following the events up to that point, the choice couldn't have been better.

The studio has grown since to accommodate the new project. Randy Smith, the designer of Thief, and Viktor Antonov, Half-Life 2's art director, are both freelance consultants on the project, while the internal team boasts a wide range of development experience. To put the cherry on the first-person cake, Arkane even has regular meetings with Valve, where the game is demonstrated and suggestions exchanged. The studio has had a lot of input in several areas, especially scripting and character animations.

MOVING FORWARD WHILE LOOKING BACK

All that indicates why Arkane has the pedigree and Dark Messiah is much more than just a cash-in attempt by Ubisoft. It's interesting to note that the team is striving to keep things familiar for Might & Magic players, but the game itself is a completely new beast – and not only in context of Might & Magic. The party system has been removed for a single-player experience, though a 32-player Crusade multiplayer mode will also be included, and the turn-based combat is gone. Instead, Arkane is ambitiously aiming towards creating the first proper first-person close-combat system. This is a step beyond what most games of this kind have done before. In Oblivion and UU combat is controlled through clicks and dice rolls. Arkane wants

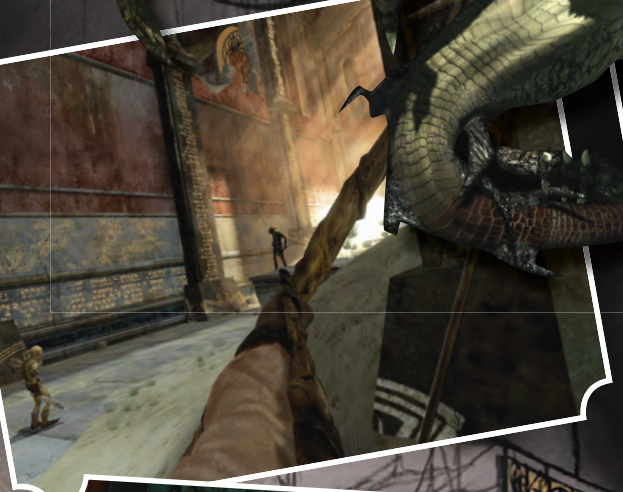
to step away from that philosophy and though it is most evident in the combat system, this embraces the entire philosophy behind a game. Colantonio believes that games don't need to rely on the decisions of a dice roll combined with stats when such elements can be expressed by a player's own interaction.

As such, Dark Messiah seeks to break with convention by allowing as free an RPG dynamic as possible. Dungeon Siege took a similar approach with its free-form classes, where player style influences the skills of the character they play. Dark Messiah does exactly the same: skills that are unlocked can be practiced to become better. Some skills take more mastering than others and some have context-specific uses. Weapons and items that players pick up go towards improving stats. Producer Romain de Waubert de Genlis (who previously worked on Battlefield 1942 and Battlefield 2) termed this as the balance between innate and acquired – players will both have to find and advance their weapons and items while they also work on expanding specific skills. With complimenting equipment and talents, a player can be a formidable force. This dynamic won't be restricted by class. Even though Dark Messiah does have three classes – warrior, assassin and sorcerer – a mould isn't selected at the start. Instead, each class has specific skills that are suited to it. But nothing stops a player who chose an assassin from picking up a sword for a good brawl or learning a fireball spell. This allows characters to be created uniquely as the focus shifts from player to player. That also creates a big challenge for Arkane, since such intuitive systems can be disastrous. Unfortunately not enough of this part has been demonstrated enough to see if it really works. Gamers also have fears of this kind of promise – something similar never materialised in Lionhead's Fable.

Still, the design philosophy is sound. What makes it more applicable than with past games, though, is that it doesn't stop with the character classes. Since there are three distinct classes, levels can't simply accommodate one route. This helps make up for another element that Dark Messiah removes from the Might & Magic series, which featured generally in large, open worlds. Dark Messiah will restrict players more, keeping them on a fairly linear path that goes through 12 massive levels (said to be at least as big as Half-Life 2's), with a lot of inspiration and ambience from the Thief and Ultima Underworld titles. Each level will accommodate all three classes: assassins will have holes to crawl through and high perches to drop from; warriors will have big doorways and lots of combat room; and sorcerers can ply their skills in a variety of manners, up close or from a distance. As such, there is no 'stealth level', but most of the game can be played through stealth methods. Arkane wants to break the reliance on class limitations, so a free-form system where players can mould their classes as they play through a world that accommodates their specific style is the way to go. It's also been something long mentioned as a feature in RPG titles, but never truly accomplished.

YOUR CLASS IS NEWTON

Physics is the next hallmark for cutting-edge game development. The Source engine regards this as one of its biggest strengths and it was apparently one of the main reasons why Arkane licensed it. So far, the best third-party game to use it has been Vampire: Bloodlines, a title that didn't make much use of Source's next-gen capabilities. But Dark Messiah does – this is evident in how it supersedes even Half-Life 2. The game environments are lush and detailed, boasting the latest



Magic effects will be powerful, affecting the environment as well





Combat aims to be physical and solid.
The bigger they are...



in lighting and shader technology. The HDR features that were recently introduced to Source will also be there, plus those physics.

If it looks like it can move, it probably can. That's the word from Arkane on interaction in the game. With a model that caters for a free play and development style, the world would be disappointing if it didn't compliment that with high interactivity. As such, the physics will be one of the highlights of Dark Messiah. Players can do a variety of things to use areas to their advantage, such as cutting the ropes on bridges, swinging over deep crevices or bringing stone pillars toppling down. The enemy characters can do the same as well.

But the beauty of it all comes with the combat. It's one of the first things mentioned in this article and arguably the highlight of Dark Messiah. Arkane has shunned the idea that close quarter combat with weapons such as swords and staves can't be done in the first-person. As such, this game doesn't

boast a click-to-hit system or some gimmick to circumvent the act of bludgeoning something with your sword. The team is very proud of its Full Body System. It's a concept really – the idea that you can see your feet. It means the player's character takes a full presence in the world and isn't simply a disembodied floating camera. This ups the level of interactivity, especially for things that want to kill you, and makes for a spectacular combat system. Swords clash dramatically and sparks fly as two blades scrape against each other. Blows can be blocked with a swipe of the shield and a sturdy kick can send an opponent stumbling backwards. Magic users can send fireballs hurtling at opponents, physically freeze monsters in their tracks, and even create slippery slopes by freezing the ground. Assassins can sneak in the dark, grab monsters from behind and stab their throats. The combat system is very physical; this is where a lot of the skill development comes into play. The more a character does something, the better he or she gets at it. Instead of using a dice roll, skill points empower a manoeuvre or technique that is being physically honed by the player. Combine this with the physics engine, interactive environment and multi-path levels...



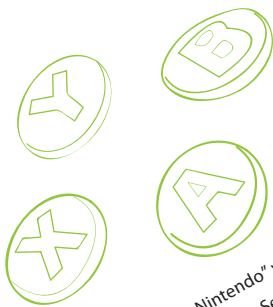
A NEW RPG EPOCH?

With no levels to treadmill and no dice odds to regulate a game, Dark Messiah is geared towards action RPG fans. But it wants to keep that integral Might & Magic appeal, so the whole game will try and keep its feet rooted in the RPG tradition. At the same time, it's attempting to introduce a new way to approach the first-person RPG where swords exist instead of guns. Might & Magic creator Jon van Caneghem isn't involved, but he has given his nod of approval for the title and it looks like Ubisoft's gamble on a darker, more mature Might & Magic title (also reflected in the upcoming Heroes of Might & Magic) that hopes to reinvent as much as it remains true, will pay off. The game definitely looks incredible and with Arkane being very aware of the disaster a terrible control scheme or interaction system could create, there's a lot of faith that Dark Messiah will deliver. Arx Fatalis itself should speak volumes, while the close ties with Looking Glass and Valve show the development calibre involved here. It will appear stunted when compared to the open-world environments that Might & Magic had in the past, but everything else aims to make up for abandoning a lot of RPG tradition in favour of something new and interesting. **NAG**

Next-Gen NOW!

WE LOVE THE SMELL OF HIGH-DEFINITION IN THE MORNING





YOU CAN'T DO THAT on a Nintendo* was how Sega threw down the gauntlet. Sega's television campaign for the Sega Genesis/Mega Drive (which included the aforementioned statement) echoed a clear sentiment: that Sega was here to do battle and win in the console wars.

Sega lost, no longer producing consoles after the dismal failure that was the Sega Dreamcast. The American company turned Japanese fought and lost. Many years later, Microsoft entered the scene with its own console offering, the Xbox (advertised by Bill Gates and wrestler-gone-actor The Rock). The Xbox didn't break any official records, but it managed to carve enough of a market for itself so that Microsoft's next attempt would do much better.

The thing about the Xbox and now, the Xbox 360, is that the console itself is not the main product. Consoles have always been sold at a loss - that much is well-known. Only Nintendo managed, with the GameCube, to actually release a console that didn't cost more to produce than it did to sell. No, the real product Microsoft is selling is the Xbox Live experience. Live made the Xbox what it was and it certainly makes the 360 what it is now: a global experience with everyone involved. The 360 is the days where consoles were considered a predominantly single-player experience by the mainstream market (though gaming aficionados have been playing online with consoles since the Sega Genesis), and gone are the days where consoles were considered static, unchanging experiences. The Xbox 360 is the key. Xbox Live is the door. Let's take a look at the experience the 360 has to offer, leaving the specifics of the game *as for later*.

OUT OF THE BOX

The 360 comes in two flavours: Core and Premium. Core lacks the two major components that make the 360 the experience it is: the HDD and the wireless headset. Plainly put, purchasing the Core system is a waste of time and money. A Core and HDD purchased separately, ends up being more expensive than a Premium which comes with the HDD standard. The Premium system comes with either the wireless headset or the Universal Remote (Australian but ideally you'd want the wireless headset. Out of the box, everything plugged in and hooked up to television and Internet connection, setting up the 360 is simple. Online access is either one button-

press away (if your router is using DHCP), or a few IP owners get a one-month free trial of Xbox Live Gold (see section 'Xbox Live'). The bundled HDD has an unexpected benefit. It comes pre-loaded with some content to sweeten the deal. Aside from the full game Hexic, a puzzler involving hexagonal shapes, various videos and music inhabit the HDD until you decide to delete them. The added content isn't particularly special or inspiring, though Hexic is sure to help you while away a few hours when you just don't feel like playing anything else.

THE GUIDE

Everything you do on the Xbox 360 is achieved via the Guide. Linked to the Guide is the Guide button on the controller (which is either wireless, or wired, depending on which system you bought). This X-emblazoned button on the controller actually switches the console on, remotely. Holding the Guide button in will both power up the 360, or (after confirmation) power it down. You never have to get up from your couch, except if you want to swap games in the disc tray.

The Guide button brings up (anytime, anywhere, even in-game) a 'Blade'. Each Blade in the Guide has its own purpose, ranging from Xbox Live related tasks to playing various media off either the 360 itself or from a linked-up PC running Windows XP Media Center Edition. The Blade brought up during a game tends to be a personal Blade, letting you sign in with a new profile, check messages, message online (or offline) friends, or start up some music. When you opt to play personal music while in a game, the game will automatically switch its own music off and switch it back on when you stop your personal music selection.

When not in a game, the Guide is split into specific categories: Xbox Live, Gaming, Media and Settings. The Xbox Live Guide lets you access Live to message friends (either with text or recorded voice), add/remove friends, check what friends are doing, download demos, download content for games you own and so forth. An odd limitation (but one that will be fixed in the future, according to Microsoft) is that you can't do anything on the 360 while it's downloading. You can pause and resume downloads, but you can't play a game while downloading. You can download new themes and gamer pictures. Themes re-skin how your Guide looks while gamer pictures are used to identify yourself online. You cannot upload your own gamer picture, something that might annoy some gamers. The Gaming Guide is for playing downloaded demos, watching game trailers downloaded via Live, or for playing/downloading Xbox Live Arcade games. The Media Guide lets you play DVDs, media stored

on the HDD or on a PC, as well as music. The Settings Guide contains options to adjust the console privacy settings, connections and other miscellaneous items.

XBOX LIVE ARCADE

Xbox Live Arcade is an online 'store' of sorts where gamers can download trial versions of indie-developed or retro games, such as Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved and Gauntlet. The trial versions are usually time limited, but give you enough time to decide if you want to purchase the full version or not. Purchasing the full version (if the Xbox has your credit card details stored) is ludicrously easy: a single button-tap and then confirmation will unlock 'Points'. These Points tend to be around 100 per dollar, with a game such as Geometry Wars priced at 400 Points. All the games on Xbox Live Arcade are relatively cheap, with more games being added as





time progresses. Xbox Live Arcade games tend to include Live-enabled play. Games such as Gauntlet and Smash TV can be played either locally (four controllers, four friends) or online on Live. The Points system is an effective micro-transaction. Microsoft plans to incorporate much more into Marketplace and Live Arcade later, such as the ability to give Points to other players in exchange for user-created content. The main reason for Points is to avoid the 'five dollar minimum'.

XBOX LIVE

The real product Microsoft is selling, Xbox Live, encompasses an entirely new way of looking at online gaming. Part of Xbox Live is the Achievements system – a series of unlockable medals that have Gamer Score values. Every Xbox 360 game has Achievements, some easier to get than others. Achievements raise your total Gamer Score, though the score per Achievement is never indicative of the difficulty in getting that Achievement. Often Achievements are frivolous, such as the 'Lost 5 matches in a row' badge of shame from Dead or Alive 4. Others are much more coveted, such as the 'Pacifism' Achievement from Geometry Wars (don't shoot for 60 seconds). These Achievements allow gamers to quickly see what a friend (or passer by) thinks of a specific game. Obviously the more Achievements a gamer has for a game, the more he has some form of Live interaction. Every game

each 360 game will be listed what Live components that game supports. The Leaderboards are usually so seamlessly integrated that you almost don't notice them. Only once you have finished a lap in Project Gotham Racing 3, playing through the offline career mode, will you notice that your lap-times are being eternally compared to everyone who has ever done that track. At first it seems unnecessary, but soon one realises just how powerful an element it is. Online matchmaking on Xbox Live is also a one-button affair, but not limited to. You can always host your own game with your own settings, or join a

specific server. Live attempts to place you in a server that is both fast for you and meets certain criteria. The first of this is the TrueSkill value. As you play online, Live tracks your wins, losses and immediate play style. It assigns you a TrueSkill value, one which very accurately summarises your capabilities. Then it will try to always put you in a server (if you select Quick Play in a game) with people of equal TrueSkill. The second criterion is that of your Player Feedback. In any online game you can quickly select anyone who is in the game with you and report Feedback. Feedback is a multiple-choice affair. If a player drives aggressively in a game and that ticks you off, just report 'Aggressive' on the feedback. If a player is helpful, courteous and kind, you can report that on the feedback sheet.

This feedback isn't used to report players for malicious behaviour or cheating. It's used solely to help Live match you up with people you like. The more you rate someone positively, the more likely it will put you in the same online game as them. Negative feedback lets Live know you'd rather not play with that person again. The more you participate in the feedback system, the better your online experience becomes. If someone doesn't like you, giving negative feedback and thus, you'll see less of them online.

Another layer of matchmaking is the Gamer Zone idea. You choose your own zone, Pro, Underground, Recreation or Family, and Live will know what to do. Recreational gamers are rarely matched up with Pro gamers, while Underground gamers tend to flit in and out of both sides. Gamer Zones are groupings of like-minded people, as well as an automatic filter. Players set to Family Gamer Zone will automatically avoid people who have 'Swearing' listed on the Gamer Feedback charts.

If you're busy in a game and you notice a friend has come online, via the Notifications that appear regardless of where you are, you can invite them to your game. You simply hit the Guide button, select the name of the friend and select Invite. Once invited, if that friend has the game and accepts, he or she will automatically enter the same game as you (dependent on the game, naturally).




Live isn't free, and costs around \$50 per year. This gives you unlimited access for that year, and you can also pay smaller amounts for smaller access intervals. TimeCards are sold internationally (and hopefully locally), so you don't need to use your credit card to pay for Live. You can also get Points Cards that give you a special series of numbers you can enter to credit your account with a specific number of Points. It's possible to experience the full Live effect without using a credit card.

If you chose not to pay for Live, you have what is called Silver Membership. Silver still gives you access, for free, to Marketplace, Xbox Live Arcade and the message centre, but you cannot play Xbox 360 games online with just a Silver Membership. Both Gold and Silver access requires the HDD.

Xbox Live is as much the Xbox 360 experience as the high-definition gaming. To avoid Gold Membership is to avoid a large chunk of what makes the 360 such a next-generation console. Next-generation doesn't exclusively mean access, it means that this new generation has a fresh approach to almost every aspect of console gaming, and gaming in general.







genres of games. For First-Person Shooters, as an example, you can specify that you prefer an inverted Y-axis; this will then become the standard for all FPS games on the 360, past and present. You can set up preferred acceleration controls for Racing games, or rudder/throttle master controls for Flight Simulations. This removes a lot of the 'setting up your controls' frustration from games.

Another small, almost unnoticed feature is that of the controller battery indicator on the Personal Blade. The Xbox 360 has either wired controllers (totally last-generation), or sleek wireless controllers. The wireless controllers can either take rechargeable AAA batteries, or the separately sold rechargeable pack (that comes with a docking station for charging). Naturally, you'd want to know how much juice is left. If you press the Guide button at the top of the Blade with three bars representing power. If the controller is running very low, the lights around the Blade with notice a battery indicator at the top of the Blade with three bars representing power. If the controller is running very low, the lights around the Blade with notice a battery indicator at the top of the Blade with three bars representing power.

The 'Ring of Light', as it's called, is the green circle around both the Power Button at the front of the Xbox 360 and the circle around the Guide button on each controller. This ring is segmented into four, and more commonly denotes which controller is being used by which player. If only one controller is connected, only one quadrant will be lit up on the Xbox and on the controller, denoting player 1. If all four controllers are connected, the entire ring is green on the 360, with the controller only lighting up the quadrant that denotes which number you are. This light will flash if you get a message, accompanied by a notification on the screen.

Four players, each with a controller, headset and an Xbox Live account, can play on one Xbox 360 online. Alternatively, most games allow 'Guest' accounts. If at least one Gold Member is present, another non-Live player can play online in the same game as the Gold Member.

NEXT-GENERATION AS AN IDEA

The Xbox 360 is capable of stunning visuals. High-definition support lets the Xbox 360 play games at resolutions up to 1,920 x 1,080 if the television supports it. Alternatively you can buy a VGA-cable that hooks the 360 up to a standard PC monitor, running the games at whatever resolutions the monitor supports. Now consoles are no longer limited to the lower resolution of television, and the results speak for themselves. But visuals aside, next-generation isn't just about graphics. It's about the experience and a new and fresh way of approaching console gaming. Consoles are the dominant gaming market, but have been lacking in the online department for years. Now all

THINKING AHEAD. SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO

Across the entire Xbox 360 lies a host of small, but not unappreciated features. One such feature is the Master Control Setting, a part of the Guide where you can specify a global control scheme for specific

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

When you're playing online, you are holding a controller in your hand. While the Xbox 360 controller is being widely lauded as the most comfortable controller for entering text. When you're in a comfortable game and you need to coordinate your high-stakes game and you need to coordinate your team, that's where the wireless headset and Voice over IP come in. Xbox Live supports Voice over IP anywhere, anytime. Even if you're just watching a DVD by yourself, you can invite a friend who is online to a 'private chat'. Then you can effortlessly talk to that friend over the microphone and listen to his or her responses over the headphones. More constructively, inside any game you can talk to either everyone on the server or just to your team-mates. The voice chat really enhances the online experience. You can hear connotation, sarcasm or panic in people's voices, adding an emotive layer to online gaming. Communicating online via cold, hard, text seems so 1990s after multiple online sessions with voice chat. Strategy and smack talk are both so much sweeter with that personal touch of voice chat in online gaming, as is found on Xbox Live, is that cultural boundaries and misconceptions very quickly get broken down. The initial culture shock of hearing foreign accents online quickly gives way to a much deeper appreciation of online gaming – these are real people you're playing with, represented both by their in-game avatars and voices. It's not uncommon to join a game only to hear several people ask interesting questions of someone who is obviously very foreign. More commonly however, you'll find several people engaged in casual conversation about work, school or another game they enjoy, all while everyone is tearing around a circuit at 200mph or while a deathmatch fragfest is underway.

Voice chat makes online gaming immediate and personal, taking it back to the halcyon days of two people on a couch, fighting each other in Mortal Kombat.

Both work together to provide a seamless online gaming experience complete with content add-ons, voice chat and even the occasional feature-adding or bug-fixing patch for certain games. One could easily call the 360 a 'PC', but that would only be true in the sense of hardware, not in approach or experience. A PC (Personal Computer) is for work. The Xbox 360 is for entertainment.

Right now, nothing comes close to what the Xbox 360 provides in terms of gaming and online gaming. Console games with multiplayer have always been a personal affair – some friends, some snacks, and some fun. Now that circle has been expanded to encompass everyone who has a 360, perhaps a much better explanation for the title of the week, at any given time of day, any day of the week, there are tens of thousands of players on Live, playing various games. One button puts you there amongst them. Next-generation is here in spirit and in practise, with Microsoft boldly leading the charge. **NAG**





MEDIA MALADY

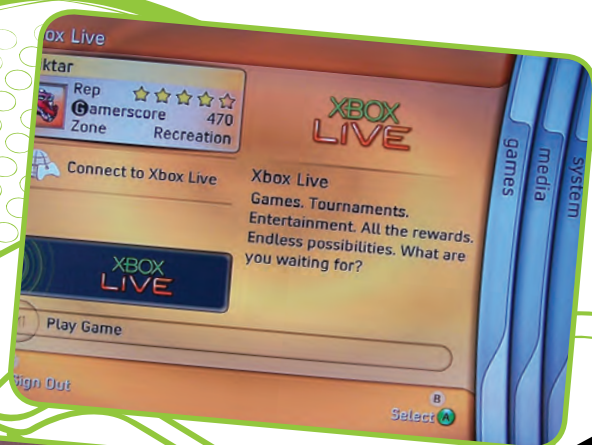
The one snag in the otherwise perfect veneer of the Xbox 360 is that of media playback. Music and pictures are fine, they can be viewed from any PC as long as the right software is installed (the 360 will tell you what to get and where when the time comes). The problem comes in with video playback. For the 360 to be able to stream video off a computer, that computer has to have Windows XP Media Center Edition installed. Naturally this is a royal pain, but Microsoft has announced that it's working on a dashboard update which will let the 360 stream video from any PC, without the need for a specialised operating system.

Due to the updateable nature of the 360, there have already been upgrades released that expand the functionality. You can download optional iPod support, which lets you play music right off an iPod, plugged into the front or back USB ports of the 360.

HIGH-DEFINITION



In the past, console games were limited to television resolution: roughly 640 x 480 or 768 x 576 pixels. This left console games at a much lower resolution than contemporary computer games, but no longer. Supporting high-definition, the Xbox 360 is capable of resolutions of 1,280 x 720 or 1,920 x 1,080, either via an HD television or through the (separately sold) VGA cable that lets you hook the 360 up to any PC monitor. This gives 360 games crisp, clear visuals on par or above that which the PC can offer (especially in context of a similar price point).



The next generation doesn't just bring better visuals. It's a whole new gaming experience

LAZY GAMER'S GUIDE

XBOX 360 - ON THE SURFACE

Supplied by: Not locally available...yet

Internet: www.xbox.com

RRP: Core: \$399.96 Premium: \$509.96

DVD Drive

With HD-DVD only having been released recently, the Xbox 360 still uses a stock-standard DVD drive. Microsoft said it would release 'upgrades' later so that the Xbox 360 can take advantage of HD-DVD technology, though at this point it doesn't look like the Xbox 360 will need it. Once the PlayStation 3 has been released, we can more accurately see how Blue-Ray will affect HD-DVD.

Controller Connection button

Pressing this tiny button and then a similar button on a wireless controller will link console and controller (up to four). This is useful for if you have two Xbox 360s (right), or if your friend brings his own controller. A quick button press and they're wirelessly linked.

Ring of Light

This ring can glow green in four quadrants, each quadrant representing one of four possible controllers connected to the Xbox 360. If a player gets a message, or if a friend of that player comes online, that player's quadrant will flash. The Ring of Light is also used for displaying errors. If the ring is flashing red, it means you have a problem.

Front USB

A few USB ports hide underneath this flap, currently only really useful for the recharging docking station for the controllers (sold separately) and for playing music off an iPod. You have to install the Optional iPod Support download first, before this will work.

Network Port (On back)

A built-in standard network port hooks the 360 up to a network or directly to an ADSL router. This allows the 360 to go on-line to play on Live or download content, or to play System Link games against other 360s on the network.

HDD Bay

The optional (but not really) HDD docks at the top of the Xbox 360 and goes almost unnoticed if it were not for the letters 'HDD' on the top. The entire HDD unit can slot out. Inside it contains a standard 20GB laptop HDD, with around 4GB dedicated to the system memory - the rest can be used for media, demos, trailers and so forth.

Video Cable Connector

A wide horizontal cable connects the 360 to a TV, HDTV or a standard PC monitor. The cable to connect the 360 to a VGA monitor is sold separately, but does allow the 360 to run its games at whatever resolutions the monitor supports. The standard Xbox 360 video cable contains the usual AV jacks, as well as another three jacks for specialised RGB HD support.



Universal Remote

The Universal Remote (bundled with Australian Premium units) is an all-in-wonder remote for watching DVDs, movies, listening to music and checking out pictures on the Xbox 360. The Universal Remote is one of the more frivolous peripherals, not really needed since the controllers are wireless anyway.



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PREVIEWS

E3: EXCITEMENT, ENTERTAINMENT, ENTROPY

LAST YEAR, E3 WAS the battleground for three new next-generation consoles exploding onto the gaming scene. The 360, PlayStation 3 and the 'last minute' Revolution were all revealed in various degrees to salivating fans. The Xbox 360 event was a large, loud press-heavy event; slick and professional in execution and approach. The PlayStation 3 event was a large European press drinking-binge with free alcohol and a host of pre-rendered/real-time videos to keep the crowd entertained. Most vendors were more interested in the PSP, though. In contrast, the Revolution event was more of an 'Everything Nintendo with a bit of Revolution at the end' affair, with Nintendo happy to show off its new Nintendo DS and only revealing a little about the Revolution. The controversial Revolution controller was only announced much later, after E3. So what will happen this year? With no new consoles to announce and only a handful of exciting games, how will E3 manage to excite, entertain and engage gamers this year? We'll give our report back next issue.



SPYHUNTER: NOWHERE TO RUN

DEVELOPER: Terminal Reality
PUBLISHER: Midway
PLATFORM: PS2, Xbox
GENRE: Action/Driving
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2006

WHY DO SOME DEVELOPERS think that to improve a game involves expanding into other genres? This is especially true in a market where there are a lot of great cross-genre titles already. So, if you ask us, Spyhunter should stay where it started – in the car. But the series keeps evolving and now your driver will have his own on-foot sections as well. These sections don't look bad (plus The Rock features as the hero, since he's in the movie as well), but after *Aeon Flux* we're not sure if Terminal Reality can pull this off. The 2001 title wasn't bad, but it didn't set the series on fire. Perhaps Midway should consider that they should go back to the original game's ideas, not seek deal-makers elsewhere.



DEVELOPER: Atari **PUBLISHER:** Atari **PLATFORM:** PSP **GENRE:** Mini Games **RELEASE DATE:** Christmas 2006

"THIS IS STREET CULTURE," stated a *Hardknox* song. We're more inclined to believe that from a legendary London dance act than Atari's claim for HOT PXL. But as we've seen with WarioWare, the theme often has little impact when you deal with micro-games. HOT PXL promises hundreds of these as you take control of a skater/nerd during his usual day. The design looks a bit like the PSP ads that have recently not been making fans in Europe and the US, but we liked those ads. It's an interesting art direction. There are hints of Atari classic being somewhere in there in the form of some of the mini-games, plus other surprises that will keep the player and his skating nerd occupied, but we'll have to wait until Christmas to see if it has the charm and ease of use that this genre demands.

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WHAT WE WANT...



RED STEEL (WII)

Little is known about the upcoming Ubisoft first-person shooter for the Nintendo Wii (formerly the Revolution). The game is in development at Ubisoft Paris by developers who have previously worked on *Prince of Persia*, *Far Cry Instincts* and *Ghost Recon*. Utilising the Wii's gyro-sensing controller, you'll aim your gun in the game and control your secondary weapon, the katana. Initial reports look good, though time will tell.



HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE (PC)

Delayed, delayed and then delayed again. How long before we'll get to don the HEV hazard suit again and go all Gordon Freeman on the Combine? Despite long-winded debates about graphics vs. gameplay, everyone at NAG loves Half-Life 2 and everyone (we think) wants to play Episode One, the Steam-released mini-expansion. Now if only Steam would finish updating, then perhaps we could start pre-loading content.



CIVCITY: ROME

DEVELOPER: Firefly Studios
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: City Management
RELEASE DATE: Q2 2006

FIREFLY STUDIOS, WHO DEVELOPED the excellent Stronghold games, is collaborating with Sid Meier's former outfit Firaxis to create what is called the most accurate simulation of Roman life yet. After a few recent documentaries we realised we knew nothing about the Romans in the first place, so if anything, this should be an education. The game will feature hundreds of types of buildings, ranging from schools and theatres to shops and roman baths. The plan is to start with a small settlement and develop it into a massive city, including a tech tree with over 70 technologies. It certainly does look good and the angle that it took 'inspiration' from, *Civilization*, is intriguing. Could a new type of city sim be on its way?



VIRTUA TENNIS 3

DEVELOPER: Sega
PUBLISHER: Sega
PLATFORM: 360, PS3
GENRE: Sport
RELEASE DATE: Q2 2007

GO FIGURE, WITH THE next-generation suddenly we want to play sports games. After seeing *NBA 06* and *Fight Night Round 3* on the 360, these shots brought much more anticipation than cynicism. The 360 is definitely capable of producing these images, so will we see tennis be elevated a step up? Tennis titles have always been a stalwart of the sport gaming genre, but like boxing it might take some raw power to bring it alongside the likes of football and soccer titles. Rockstar's *Table Tennis* is heading in that direction as well. There's no mention of online play (though it's pretty much a given), but there will be new players on the roster. Information is still scant on new modes or tournaments, but it will feature prominently at Sega's E3 booth. So after we wrote this, but before you've read it, there should be some interesting feedback about the new Virtua Tennis.



BRAIN AGE: TRAIN YOUR BRAIN IN MINUTES A DAY

DEVELOPER: Nintendo
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
PLATFORM: DS
GENRE: Mini Games
RELEASE DATE: June 2006

THIS IS BASED ON a book by Dr Ryta Kawashima, a neurologist who gave readers exercises to keep their mental abilities healthy. It's gained a lot of popularity and DS owners love it. The problem is, as usual, whether we'd see such a left-of-field locally? Probably not, so you might just want to start eying that import site. The game is a set of mini-challenges and exercises. These include drawing basic figures, counting puzzles, basic math, simple logic puzzles and reading classic literature out loud. When players start, they will do a series of tests to determine their brain age. As they progress through the game, this age can be measured - so you can see if you are getting any smarter. It's not a game, but it is. Educational software? The DS is a pretty clever device and it's got a lot to do with the stylus. That has helped open the doors for mini-puzzle titles.



SUPER DBZ

DEVELOPER: Crafts & Meister
PUBLISHER: Atari
PLATFORM: PS2
GENRE: Fighting
RELEASE DATE: June 2006

THE DRAGONBALL Z GAMES of the past few years have been big surprises, being innovative in their presentation and original in how they approached the fighting genre. There are some gripes about Tenkaichi's new view modes, but with *Shin Budokai* on its way to the PSP, Atari clearly isn't done with the series. The new game, Super DBZ, is being developed by Craft & Meister, the studio founded by *Street Fighter 2* producer Noritaka Funamizu. This brings with it the news that the game will be taking DBZ into the arcade fighter arena. Is this good or bad? That remains to be seen - one thing DBZ does differently to its contemporaries is the high-powered battles, complete with highly destructive powers. Can that be captured in a traditional arcade-fighter environment?



MORE OBLIVION (PC/360)

The stunning RPG by Bethesda has captured the hearts and minds of the NAG staff and we love it, but you can't have too much of a good thing. Naturally, we're eager at the prospect of more downloadable content, despite the micro payments involved. The first DLC was an armoured horse - a bit daft for \$2. Bethesda is promising much more involved content soon, such as Orrery and Wizard's Tower. The former is a quest to repair Dwarven astrology (and may involve lycanthropy), and the latter is a new property you can live in.



CHROME HOUNDS (360)

There just aren't enough mech games. Now with FASA being all but defunct and Microsoft not bothering with its *Mechwarrior* license, our only hope is Chrome Hounds from SEGA. Set for exclusive release for the Xbox 360 on 29 June, Chrome Hounds (developed by From Software) is looking to be our best bet for big-robot combat action. The visuals look stunning in the initial videos, though once again, little is known about the title itself other than that it involves 10-ton death machines.



NINTENDO DS BROWSER (DS)

From the people who created Opera, the Web browser for the PC and Mac, comes a Web browser for the diminutive Nintendo DS. The Japanese release is set for June, with no word on when the rest of the world will be able to use their DSs at hotspots to surf the Internet. You'll even be able to enter a URL via handwriting, thanks to the stylus input the DS offers. Rumours are pointing at a December release for the US, but there's no word on a European release yet.

Developer: Rockstar
 Publisher: 2K Sports
 Distributor: Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900
 Platform: 360
 Genre: Sport
 Release: June 2006

ROCKSTAR PRESENTS TABLE TENNIS



If Pong was the last game you played,
 you're in for a bit of a shock



THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT PING-PONG that people can't get enough of. Did you know that it's apparently the most played game in the world? We always thought it was football. Then again, apparently the Chinese love it, so that's a billion plus right there. In fact, the game's popularity in the Far East is without question. For the uninitiated, there's even a gripping sports drama, aptly named Ping Pong, based on a popular manga series.

But Rockstar really chose their 360 debut to be this because they love playing the real thing. As the next-generation dawns, sports titles have refined their controls and pushed their graphical capabilities enough to win over even the most stoic of dismissive gamers. There are already several examples on the 360 of how sports games are taking the lead yet again in pushing the hardware to their benefit. Rockstar's Table Tennis will be no different, making full use of the next-generation of hardware. But why table tennis? Once again, it's because Rockstar likes the concept. It even maintains that there hasn't been a decent game for the sport since the original Pong. Also, there are realistic factors. GTA is pretty much tied up with Sony and Rockstar's other games haven't been setting the world on fire (though, by and large, they have all been well received), so the company is trying a change of scenery. But it doesn't seem so much about survival as Rockstar trying to establish that it can do more than just GTA.

Table Tennis won't be a showy product as far as today's sports titles go. There is no character customisation, instead there will be eleven to choose from, each with slightly different attributes. The emphasis falls more on the gameplay and implementing technique. There are essentially two shots: top spin and slice. Each shot leaves a colour trail that identifies it as such. This simple approach means that the game is very easy to pick up and come

to grips with. Rockstar, when speaking to gaming site Eurogamer, noted the game is constantly being tested on anyone in the office. The goal is to create a universal game that anyone can play.

But the real appeal in a sports title lies in mastering it. Players can easily manipulate a shot with the angle and power used. Holding in the shot button gains more power, but short and long bursts works strategically to foil your opponent. There are also 'dink shots', a short bounce over the net that could force your opponent to overshoot.

Building up power also boosts your intensity meter. When activated, this starts the focus shot, a slow motion, high precision mode that can turn a game quickly. When both players activate this the lights over the crowd dark out and the music stops. In short, it is kept simple to get the maximum intensity in what is actually a very fast and high precision sport. Graphically, being next-gen only, Table Tennis is looking amazing. Eurogamer, in its hands-on session, noted the sweat effect, including sweat stains forming on players' clothes. Everything in the game will be authentic and branded (from the clothes to the tables), so this is a serious sports fan title. It just won't feature a roster of Ping-Pong greats, but we can't name any anyway. Can you?

Most people dislike it because, well, they can't play it. But if Rockstar can remove the embarrassment of losing control over a plastic marble, this is bound to be a big hit. Live support guarantees some online action and the most important element of online sports games, the spectator mode, has been confirmed. It all seems to fall in place in a game that will help define Rockstar as something other than a violence-monger. Not that we are not waiting for GTA 4, but it's nice to see Rockstar taking on something completely different. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

Massive

■ Publisher

Vivendi

■ Distributor

Midigital [011] 723-1967

■ Genre

RTS

■ Release Date

2007



WORLD IN CONFLICT

THE COLD WAR ISN'T exactly a stepchild when it comes to stories for conflict in games. The Red Alert series is perhaps the most well-known example of a game heading into a 'what if' scenario, where the Soviet Union and the United States stand off with massive weapons and itchy trigger fingers. Unfortunately the one problem with the

Cold War is that it wasn't a war as such, but a stand-off between world forces. Cunning diplomacy, politics and espionage were more hallmarks of this era than tanks driving down Broadway. But when it comes to a tactical action game, politicians simply don't make for a fun time, unless you get to blow them up.

World in Conflict marks another RTS developer moving from sci-fi locations to a more real world theme. Massive is best known for the award-winning *Ground Control* series and it has decided to take its experience to a similarly strategic RTS game. But *World in Conflict* bucks the trend with an element of resource management. While resources won't be gathered,

each side is allocated a specific amount and spots on the map can be captured for more building material. The idea is to create an aggressive battlefield where the two



Can you remember when game tanks were a block with a line drawn into it?

sides will take each other on boldly - a tactic that worked well for *Dawn of War*. This will be complimented with a completely destructible environment, another hallmark of new games that is becoming more common.

The year is 1989 and the Berlin Wall is still standing. Russia decides to invade Europe and NATO responds, but soon finds itself fighting on another front: the American homeland. Just like those pesky Reds in *Red Alert*, the Communists managed to get to the land of the free and run their hardware over the citizens' lawns. One focus that Massive is maintaining is the accuracy of the weapons. If it didn't exist in 1989, it won't feature in the game. But if it did and it was really cool, you can expect to build and fire it. Both sides will feature superpower weaponry plus a large chunk of the creative arsenals that the Cold War spawned. Players will be given control of air, ground and naval units to defend or conquer the US, with a heavy focus on combining their tactical worth and changing strategy midway in a battle. Massive wants to remove the element of using specific units to dominate a battle – the destructive environment will impact how well specific units can operate. For instance, artillery is best when amongst buildings (which can be blown away).

So far, the details on the single-player campaign are that it will follow the story of a US soldier, though multiplayer will obviously feature on both sides, including co-op. There is a heavy emphasis on team play, so expect that to feature heavily in the game's overall design. Massive will also debut its Massgate online gaming technology, promising that lag and such problems will be a thing of the past.

Massive and its *Ground Control* series give us enough faith in World in Conflict's claims. The engine looks amazing and the team developing it has a reputation for delivering games that demand a focus on larger and varied strategy. It's only due next year, though, so expect more to surface in the near future. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	GCN

■ Developer

Yukes

■ Publisher

THQ

■ Distributor

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445 7900

■ Genre

Wrestling

■ Release Date

Q3 2006

While Rey Mysterio might not be champion when you read this, he'll still rule this game



WWE SMACKDOWN VS. RAW 2007

AH, WRESTLING. YOU EITHER love it or you just don't get it. Unfortunately wrestling games have been slow to embrace the deeper complexity behind WWE storylines, plus the games never quite made the mark in impersonating the real thing. Considering that pro wrestling is staged, this should be a bit easier to accomplish than with sports titles, but the going has been slow. RAW vs. Smackdown 2006, though, drew a decisive line in with a storyline from the WWE scriptwriters that rivalled the real deal. Now Yukes and THQ want to take that up a notch in several aspects.

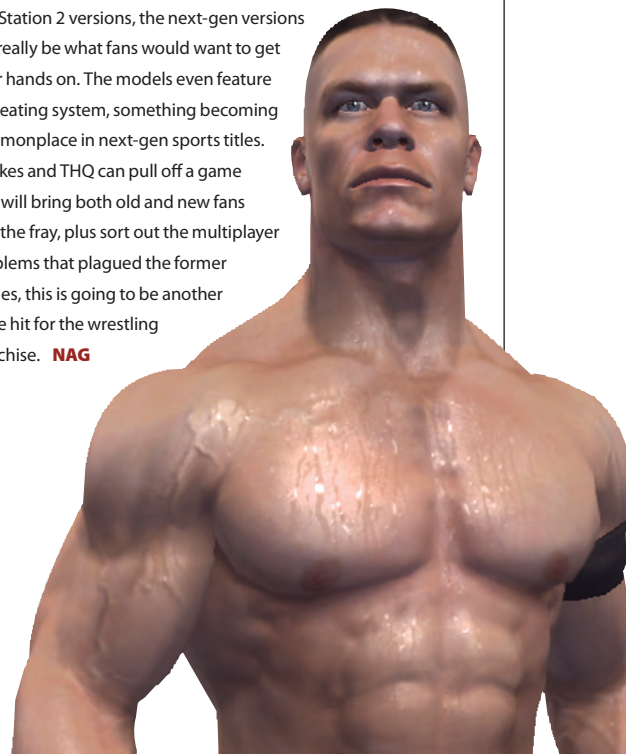
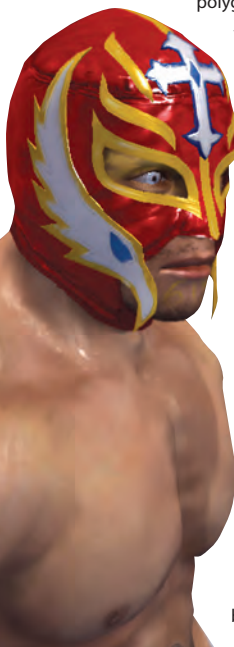
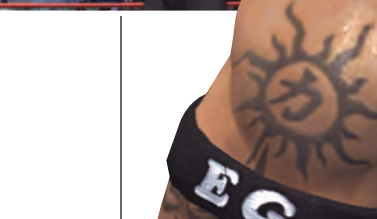
The most obvious change to the series is that it will be multi-platform, including the next-gen PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. In that case, the graphical enhancement will be more than notable. 2007 is likely to get the same response the glistening visuals from Fight Night 3 got on the 360. Each wrestler boasts around 20,000

polygons, and even facial expressions are far more robust to show pleasure, pain or whatever vein-popping intensity Kurt Angle wants to invoke. This fixes a major problem with wrestling games in general, since the characters often felt a lot like plastic dolls than flesh-and-blood ring entertainers.

In addition, more focus has been given to the analogue combat system and it will reportedly be easier to execute more varieties of moves in and outside the ring. "Don't just watch it, live it," is the game's rather contrived mantra, but the philosophy seems to be seeping in. The action aims to be more fluid and intuitive. Hotspots have been placed all around the ring and

combatants can now not only fight outside the ring, but also up the ramp, amongst the crowd and pretty much anywhere they can get to. Players will be able to slam Triple H's head into a stage speaker box, or slam Rey Mysterio through a table from the top of a balcony. There will be more interactive elements to the game and over 50 different types of fights.

This will be complimented with an improved Manager section, and a single-player story with multiple paths and voice contributions from more than 90% of the WWE roster. Legends have been included, plus you can still create your own wrestler as well. Overall, the WWE wrestling games seem to be taking a big step up. While the changes will be obvious in the Xbox and PlayStation 2 versions, the next-gen versions will really be what fans would want to get their hands on. The models even feature a sweating system, something becoming commonplace in next-gen sports titles. If Yukes and THQ can pull off a game that will bring both old and new fans into the fray, plus sort out the multiplayer problems that plagued the former games, this is going to be another huge hit for the wrestling franchise. **NAG**



Always **Cool** and Ready for Overclock



ASUS EN7900GT TOP Combine Explosive Performance with Innovative Features along with Peter Jackson's King Kong Right out of the Box

High-end graphics solutions and overheating concerns almost come hand in hand, especially when hardcore users try to tax the cards like there's no tomorrow. However, the recent introduction of EN7900GT TOP from ASUS has outfitted the cards with advanced heat pipe and memory cover designs that helps to keep the GPU and memory chips temperatures down to a bare minimum, while sustaining maximum performance capacity.

Performance is exactly the key in the development of EN7900GT TOP. With standard clock speed of EN7900GT at 450MHz (core) and 1.3GHz (memory), the EN7900GT TOP is capable of reaching 520 MHz (core) and 1.44GHz (memory) respectively. In answer to gamers' plea, the EN7900GT TOP also enabled overclocking function among a slew of exclusive innovations from ASUS, allowing users to milk every drop of power out of the cards for desired performance, and offering interactive gaming along the way. But wait, there's more! The series also come bundled with Peter Jackson's King Kong: the Full Edition Official Game of the Movie, for complete experience instantly right out of the box.

Heatpipes, heatpipes, heatpipes!

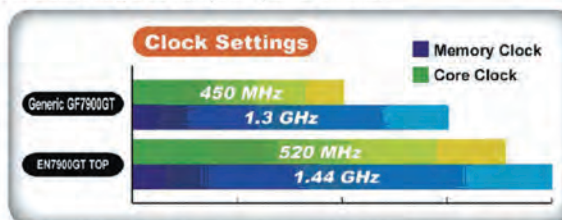
To offer stable operation to go with robust performance, the EN7900GT TOP specifically adopted heat dissipating pipes to sustain maximum GPU capacity. Furthermore, the efficient cooling design included memory covers to permit heat transfer directly from memory chipsets onto the heatpipes for faster and more reliable performance. The dedicated heatpipe is affixed onto the GPU with memory mounting pads that absorb heat away from the GPU and memory chips during operation. Effectively diffusing the heat by the enclosed fan, the result is a graphics card with unrivaled performance for ultimate video quality connoisseurs.



▲ Memory mounting pads divert heat away from GPU and memory chips.

Overclock for even better performance

Apart from hardware ingenuity, the EN7900GT TOP offers overclocking ability to satisfy hardcore gamers and provide top-shelf graphics quality. Capable of supporting high definition TV output and delivering industry's fastest anti-aliasing for ultra-realistic visuals, the EN7900GT TOP adopted Microsoft DirectX9.0 Shader model 3.0 to ensure stunning and complex special effects.



▲ EN7900GT TOP out performs Generic EN7900GT significantly in clock speeds

Complete Gaming Experience

In addition to industry-leading specifications, the two graphics cards also incorporated exclusive innovations found only on ASUS solutions.

ASUS GameReplay: Practice makes perfect, and that holds true in gaming as well. For popular LAN (local area network) party team games such as Counter Strike and Unreal Tournaments, strategy is the key to victory. GameReplay records gaming action into MPEG4 video files so that teams can review all the moves and tactics to improve for the next tournament. The recorded files can also be used as screen savers or posted on blogs.

GameLiveShow: Just like people who share their lives and thoughts on blogs, expert gamers often want to show off their perfectly executed strategies and five-hit combinations. GameLiveShow is created to allow gamers to stream broadcast their gaming experiences live over the Internet. Other players can now go online to check out how the experts really do it.

GameFace Messenger: It is a user-friendly interface similar to those of the most popular messenger services to simplify the process of inviting multiple players to a gameferences (game conferences). Register, log on and start the fun. GameFace Messenger is as easy as the free messengers currently in the market.

Splendid Video Intelligence Technology: Built into the driver of ASUS graphics cards, Splendid detects activation and usage of video applications and automatically optimizes image quality for the best visual results. Splendid further provides five modes for best visual results in different video applications (Standard, Game, Theater, Scenery and Night)

By teaming up powerful graphics processing, unique gaming feature and innovative cooling design, ASUS has successfully created a video card that can do just about anything. Along with the red-hot game of the year "King Kong" shipped in the same box, this is certainly an offer no one can refuse.

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

Flagship Studios

■ Publisher

Namco

■ Distributor

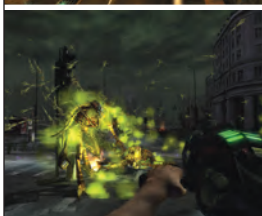
TBA

■ Genre

Action RPG

■ Release Date

2006



HELLGATE (1984)

COMpletely unrelated, but the name *Hellgate* was used before in a game.

Jeff Minter's one-man development company, Llama Soft, released a game named *Hellgate* on the Commodore 64 in 1984. It was a sequel to *Laserwars*, a Llama Soft game that was ported from the VIC20, the C64's predecessor. It involved manning cannons in the middle of the screen while enemy units and cannons spawned on all four sides of the arena. Fans termed it as an insane shooter. Since Llama Soft games are now free, you can download it at www.llamasoft.co.uk/lc-8bit.php.



HELLGATE: LONDON

HELLGATE: LONDON'S RELEASE DATE is looming, and perhaps with that a nail in the coffin of the studio that was Blizzard. The developer is still going strong with its *World of Warcraft* franchise, but it has been years since the company released anything original. Flagship Studios consists out of a lot of notable Blizzard renegades, including Bill Roper and most of what was Blizzard North. The companies still get along, but *Hellgate* shows how Blizzard's creative forces wanted to do more than what they could at their former company.

Essentially, if done right, *Hellgate* will become known as the spiritual successor to *Diablo*, even if *Diablo 3* arrives. The team set out to essentially do *Diablo* in a first-person perspective. Characters will be able to level-up, making use of an extensive skill tree that *Diablo* fans will be familiar with. Similarly, percentage-based item drops, large hordes of enemies, random dungeons and levels, plus a heavy focus on multiplayer all betray *Hellgate*'s origins.

So far the Templar class is still the only one known of, but there will be several. Attacks are also percentage based. Even though the first-person mode will grant a lot of accuracy, the damage effects of most weapons are splashed and take on multiple enemy targets. This allows players to be devastating at ranges, their effectiveness determined by their stats. Melee combat also features heavily, including a chain system for close-quarter slaughters. Basically it's safe to consider this not a first-person shooter, but a first-person action-RPG. A third-person over-the-shoulder view will also feature, though weapons appear to be reliant on specific views.

The developer states that the project has finally reached the stage where it is truly impressive, so a release is not too far off. Considering how long RPG fans have been starved for something to replace the emptiness that *Diablo II* left, *Hellgate* looks like a great place to get started. It's also bound to be a more polished game. Flagship's Dave Brevik noted



how this game actually had a large and extensive design document, a fairly new approach for the ex-Blizzard staffers. At face value, *Hellgate: London* is sounding better and better. Can we expect more sleepless weekends when it gets released? **NAG**

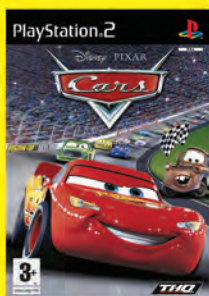
What's New



Dance Factory
[PS2]
Dance Mat Compatible!



The Da Vinci Code
[PS2]



Cars
[PS2]



Over The Hedge
[PS2]



Singstar Rocks!
[PS2]



Tourist Trophy
[PS2]



**Rise & Fall
Civilizations At War**
[PC]



The Da Vinci Code
[PC]



Cars
[PSP]



**Syphonfilter
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[PSP]



**Singstar
Rocks! Bundle**
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VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	GCN

Developer

EA Canada/Aki

Publisher

EA

Distributor

EA South Africa [011] 516-8300

Genre

Combat

Release Date

2006

Snap, grapple and pop!

Wholesome street fighting goes mobile



DEF JAM FIGHT FOR NY: THE TAKEOVER

CROSS MARKETING IS A pet strategy of EA's and it helped create the huge publisher that exists today. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of this is the Def Jam series of games: a collaboration between the hip-hop label and the games' publisher. Def Jam provided the stars, the locations and the style, while EA built a solid fighting game to base it all on. The end results were impressive, featuring superstar hip-hop artists and exclusive songs that drew in the fans, all in a brawler that established a niche for itself in the fighting world. Unfortunately the Def Jam games were never highly accomplished technical fighters, which kept the series from being taken seriously by combat fans.

The PSP edition looks at changing this, mainly because developers EA Canada and Aki have worked at tightening the game a lot. The Takeover is a prequel to the original game. It tells the story of how D-Mob came to rule New York City, and involves beating seven shades of everything out of opponents. The developers are adding an impressive 180 manoeuvres and have fixed the staggering. The usual tactic of landing a few hard blows on an opponent doesn't work that well, especially



since combatants can grapple with each other from nearly any position.

In addition to this, the game will feature new locations and a new fighter, plus everything from the former two games. That means the game will have all the fighters and locations (which have all been tweaked and improved) plus a few new secrets that EA hasn't revealed yet. There will also be a Create A Fighter mode, which includes access to clothing brands like Def Jam University, Phat Farm and Ecko Unlimited. Finally, one-on-one battles will be supported over the wireless function.

So, it's another port of a popular console title for the PSP with additional changes to warrant the developers to claim that it's a whole new game. But even if you don't see it like that, with all the fighters from the series and a vastly improved combat system on a portable device, The Takeover sounds like it may be a good deal for fans of the series and combat titles. **NAG**





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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	GCN

■ Developer

Namco Bandai

■ Publisher

SCEE

■ Distributor

Ster Kinekor [011] 445-7900

■ Genre

Fighting

■ Release Date

29 September 2006



TEKKEN: DARK RESURRECTION

A LONG TIME AGO IN an arcade far away, the year was 1995. Namco generic arcade cabinets teemed with life, brought on by the advent of Tekken. Back then, the only real competition in the 3D fighter market was *Virtual Fighter*, which did well. Tekken however, managed to gain cult status fast with its air-juggling mechanical fighting system. It was perfect for players who preferred execution over style.

Now, 11 years later and six incarnations down the line, Tekken finds its way onto the PSP. This isn't its first foray into the portable market. 2001 saw Tekken Advanced on the Game Boy Advance, of all things.

Naturally, Tekken Advanced didn't do well. The game just wasn't made for two-dimensions. The PSP, on the other hand, seems more than capable of providing the polygon power to make Tekken work - anywhere and anytime.

The preview copy that forms the foundation of this Hands-on shows its youth. The code is still very early and a lot of functionality isn't complete yet. The parts that are complete, however, were surprisingly detailed. At first glance, during a standard one-versus-one fight, Tekken: Dark Resurrection looks just like its PS2 counterparts. The only noticeable difference comes in upon closer inspection. The characters aren't as detailed and lack certain frivolous trimmings. What Namco has managed to do within the confines of the PSP however, is refreshingly adept.

Around 30 characters form the line-up, with two new characters, Dragunov and Lili (from the arcade version), adding some spice. These characters fit into the Tekken universe well and don't seem as tacked-on as new characters tend to be. Armour King also makes a return, having been a fan-favourite for years.

As expected, Dark Resurrection includes a wireless two-player mode, perfect for quick head-to-head combat across any of the 19 stages. The in-game menu leads to various mini-games such as Tekken Bowling, but these segments didn't work in this early version. There is also a fully-featured training mode, running you

through your chosen character's paces and teaching you each move that your character is capable of.

Dark Resurrection aims to include all the features of its bigger brothers such as story mode, arcade mode, various training modes and the mini-games. Right now it isn't exactly clear what is PSP-unique content and which items are translations from the arcade version. That's how fully-featured this port is coming across! It seems that Namco focused heavily on getting the fighting system as perfect as possible, and it shows. Every punch, kick, throw, counter and juggle is pixel perfect, with impeccable responsiveness and timing.

Fans of the Tekken series won't be disappointed with this portable incarnation, if the preview code is anything to go by. Once the edges have been smoothed out and the final game hits the shelves, PSP owners should have a decent, solid (if technical) fighter in their hands.

Perhaps (hopefully) this will pave the way for another portable port of a Namco fighting game - *Soul Calibur*. **NAG**



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MULTI-GPU x2...crossfire

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	GCN

Developer

Juiced Games

Publisher

THQ

Distributor

WWE [011] 462-0151

Genre

Racing

Release Date

July 2006

It's Juiced, only better and mobile. Street racing in the street? Who'd have thought?



JUICED: ELIMINATOR

WE LIKED JUICED. IT WAS a valid move towards embracing street racing in a larger way. Apart from being a spot-on racing title, it also introduced the extensive use of crews and team members, gambling and the general allure behind the concept. It wasn't a street racing simulation, but an interesting take on the genre. And with millions of combinations in modifications, it was a heavy car-builder as well.

Thankfully, gamers took note and the sales were good, bringing us the next iteration. Eliminator is essentially Juiced but with the prerequisite tightening and expansions. There are two new areas, each with eight tracks, as well as nine new cars, bringing the tally to sixty. New crews and characters also debut, plus the mod parts now number 100. Juiced Games has streamlined the calendar mode, but most of the original game is intact and tidied up.

The big additions, though, come with the multiplayer. Eliminator debuts in the series. The mode is familiar to Most Wanted and Burnout players: the last car of each round drops out until only two are left. Juiced's adaptation is the ability to also do crew races. Eliminator will feature in both single and multiplayer modes, and the usual versus modes are available over the wireless link. Races also finish with new movies of the event - essentially a replay feature.

So what you get is the PS2 game with more aspects added, everything tightened, polished and scrubbed, and new multiplayer challenges to take on friends and unsuspecting commuters. Pink Slip racing is also on wireless. With a lack of solid street racers on the PSP, Juiced will be a welcome addition. Handheld enthusiasts will be able to bask in the gambling and crew-management sections more readily than console owners. But if you own the original, this will constitute more of an expansion than a new Juiced experience. Hopefully Juiced 2 isn't too far off. **NAG**



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The judge's decision is final and no further correspondence will be entered into.

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	GCN

Developer

Edan Studios

Publisher

Atari

Distributor

TBA

Genre

Racing

Release Date

24 June 2006

The Test Drive series hopes to redeem itself with loads of roads, great driving physics and cutting-edge visuals.



TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

IF BURNOUT REVENGE (PS2) is all about the 'action' and Project Gotham Racing 3 (360) is all about the 'feel', then Test Drive Unlimited is all about 'authenticity'.

Over 125 licensed vehicles, including Lamborghini, Ducati, Aston Martin, Mercedes, Saleen, Shelby and Jaguar from exclusive manufacturers, star in the upcoming addition to the long-running Test Drive series. Every car includes a functional radio, electric windows, a horn, wipers and more. Every vehicle can be upgraded with options from the actual manufacturers' catalogues. You can even buy new homes and garages to store your pride and joy(s). While by no means *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* (PC), Test Drive Unlimited will also feature aftermarket parts to boost your car's performance.

The main push from Unlimited comes in the form of its

seamless online community. Players can create or join a club to talk, chat, trade, race or organise club-based competitions and tournaments. Playing out across over 1,000 miles of Hawaiian roads, gamers will be able to win races, missions and tournaments to earn credits to purchase new cars, bikes, rare performance parts, clothes, apparel, homes and more.

Player-created challenges can be uploaded, created from a combination of more than 50 game rules and settings.

Edan Studios seems quite comfortable with the license, working hard to create possibly the most authentic racing experience since *GTR* (PC), though how detailed the driving model will get has yet to be seen. With all this emphasis on authenticity and realism, it wouldn't be surprising if Unlimited even allowed for gear-braking and other technical racing techniques. **NAG**



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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

NHWG

■ Publisher

Codemasters Online Gaming

■ Distributor

Codemasters

■ Genre

MMORPG

■ Release Date

Q3 2006



The eastern visuals are unmistakable - a boon to the game's western release



ARCHLORD

IN SOUTH KOREA, THE MMORPG is the national bird, flag and food. NHN Games is quite well-known over there, and Codemasters Online Gaming has decided to republish one of its bigger MMORPGs for the Western market.

ArchLord is currently in open Beta in South Korea, with the new Western version expected for release in Q3, 2006. The premise of the game is to become the game world's supreme ruler.

Every month, one player will take control of the world and with it, the opportunity to wreak havoc on his or her 'cowering enemies'. Becoming ArchLord gives the player ultimate global power - naturally for the sake of abuse.

David Solari, Director of Codemasters Online Gaming,

commented: "ArchLord is an incredibly important signing for Codemasters Online Gaming, and NHN has delivered an amazing world and a unique player objective. This incredible feature, where players compete to become the ArchLord, and personally shape the game world, has never been seen before in any MMO. It's sure to capture the imaginations of Western gamers and make ArchLord a landmark MMO launch for 2006." **NAG**



VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Developer

SCEE

■ Publisher

Namco Ltd

■ Distributor

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900

■ Genre

Adhesive

■ Release Date

TBA

ME & MY KATAMARI

KATAMARI DAMACY IS A worldwide phenomenon. The adhesive ball-rolling game sparked a proper sequel (We Love Katamari) and now a portable incarnation. The Prince is back, rolling up stuff, while The King lounges about on vacation. Taking place on a new island with new levels, the Katamari style is back and as quirky as ever.

This time around, a wireless battle lets four players compete, trying to out-roll each other and collect as many objects as possible.

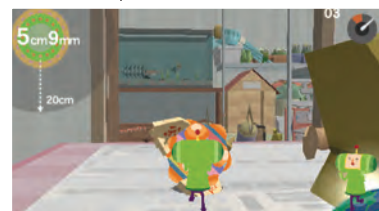
Instead of making stars, the Prince is charged with creating new islands for destitute animals - perfectly inline with the series' renowned arbitrary goal-set.

New playable cousins make an appearance, mixed in with familiar faces from the previous two titles, while new masks and headgear expand the customisation options.

Sony and the creator of Katamari Damacy have announced that this will be the last game of the series. No more Katamari games will follow. However, gamers have heard this line before - Hideo Kojima's Metal Gear Solid 2 was also the "... last Metal Gear Solid, I swear!" We all know how that turned out: two sequels later and a card-game spin-off for the PSP. **NAG**



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REVIEWS

WEB SCORES

ACT OF WAR: HIGH TREASON [PC]

NAG [100]	66
Metacritic [100]	NA
Gamerankings [100]	50



CSI: 3 DIMENSIONS OF MURDER [PC]

NAG [100]	65
Metacritic [100]	70
Gamerankings [100]	70.8



FIFA STREET 2 [PS2]

NAG [100]	62
Metacritic [100]	60
Gamerankings [100]	61.5



FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3 [PS2]

NAG [100]	83
Metacritic [100]	84
Gamerankings [100]	82.8



FULL AUTO [360]

NAG [100]	80
Metacritic [100]	70
Gamerankings [100]	71.0



THE GODFATHER [PS2]

NAG [100]	75
Metacritic [100]	76
Gamerankings [100]	76.6



GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER [PS2]

NAG [100]	39
Metacritic [100]	NA
Gamerankings [100]	57.5



THE SIMS 2: OPEN FOR BUSINESS [PC]

NAG [100]	82
Metacritic [100]	78
Gamerankings [100]	79.4



The ratings in this section, apart from the NAG ratings, are not the opinion of NAG Magazine. Duh. All scores are correct at time of printing.

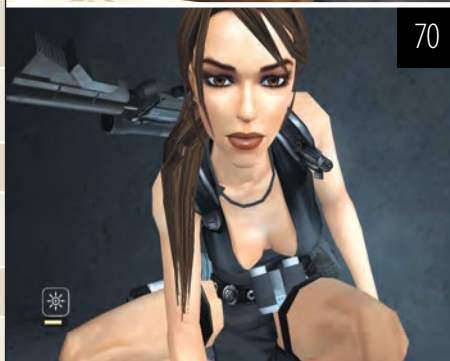
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84	Ice Age 2	[MOB]
84	Get Rich or Die Tryin'	[MOB]
84	I, Robot	[MOB]
84	Sabre Wulf	[MOB]
86	Budget: Heroes of Might & Magic IV	[PC]
86	Budget: Flatout	[PC]
87	Budget: Jak 3	[PS2]
87	Budget: Combat Flight Simulator 2: Pacific Theater	[PC]

66



70



78



83

WHAT WE'RE PLAYING...

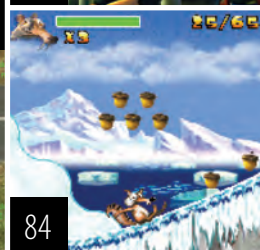
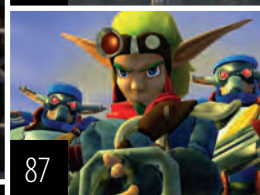
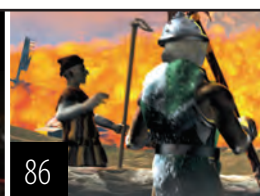


ALEXEY'S DWICE (PC)

Wait, isn't Alexey Pajitnov, the father of Tetris, dead yet? Apparently not. Dvice, his newest offering, has you matching up blocks of the same shapes to destroy them. Falling blocks in various shapes? Makes you wonder if Alexey wasn't a one-trick pony. Regardless, Dvice is a fun distraction and the demo is free. Head over to www.wildsnake.com/puzzle/dw/ to download it for yourself, but be warned: hours can whittle by while you decide if you like Dvice or not.

BONE: THE GREAT COW RACE (PC)

Following after *Bone: Out from Boneville*, this little gem of an adventure game from Telltale Games has James giddy. We all love the Bone series of comics, collectively referred to as a graphic novel. The cartoon art-style may put off more 'mature' gamers, but heck, if you can't enjoy something just for fun, despite how it looks, then what's the point? Coming in cheap at \$12, it's wonderful to see Jeff Smith's epic saga come to life in such a vibrant game.



AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE

This prestigious award gets bestowed upon games that really catch NAG's collective eye. The Editor's Choice award is for games that have some indefinable trait that just make them stand head and shoulders above the rest, peering about nervously. Usually, games that are fun, visually stunning and which leave a lasting impression are honoured with the coveted Editor's Choice. It's almost similar to knighthood, but not as humiliating!



CLASSIC AWARD

Any game that scores above 85% gets the much-envied Classic Award in honour of its achievement. Above 85% represents a game that has managed to set itself apart from the crowd of mediocrity – a game worthy of some attention. Games awarded the Classic Award are games you can trust.



SCORING

NAG is different, NAG is special. We score games on the 50% principle, meaning that we regard 50% as 'average'. It's neither here, nor there. 50% is the perfect middle ground. A game that scores 50% is a game that does nothing wrong, but nothing right either. If a game won't install properly, naturally it scores less than 50%. If a game brings something new to the table, or does what it does well, it'll go up from the 50% average. 60% is above average, a game that might appeal to some. 70% is a game that's pushing its own limits slightly, one that's perhaps putting a new spin on common ideas. 80% represents a game with a difference, one of quality and as few rough edges as possible. 90% is outstanding, a game that has separated itself from the horde to do its own thing, and does it well. No game will ever achieve 100%, because if a game ever did, we'd be out of jobs. Nobody would play anything else anyway.



CSI: 3 DIMENSIONS OF MURDER (PC)

Locally the CSI games are the top selling games, period. Amazing what brand can do. While the show may not appeal to everyone (nor does the game, for that matter), SACM's hardware-guru Regardt seems to be genially entertained by the latest game in the series. You can often find him dusting for prints around the boardroom, trying to figure out who left the lid off the jellybean jar.



MAGIC: THE GATHERING (REAL LIFE)

Some collectable card games never die, especially Magic: The Gathering. Only one person in the office plays, but that's enough to merit a mention here. The CCG genre continues to thrive on habit, expansions and by banning cards that you've spent hundreds on, not to mention *Pokémon*. After all, Magic: The Gathering is just *Dungeons & Dragons* without the imagination, or manuals, or time-consuming dice-rolling.



STRANGE LOOP (COMMODORE 64)

This golden oldie from 1985 can be brought back to life if you have the right emulation tools. It was your typical (or not so typical back then) explore the robot factor in outer space, shoot debris, avoid obstacles and solve puzzles to save Earth. There's just something magical about exploring abandoned desolate locations in space with the odds stacked against you. Even armed with graph paper and a pencil for mapping, we never managed to finish this game then. So now that we're bored...

REVIEW

The Godfather



JIMMY THE BADGER CRUISED down the street. This is his neighbourhood. The people in the streets nodded with respect. Maybe it was his handsome Italian jaw-line or his finely tailored suit that he just picked up. But it definitely had to do with the protection he was offering the local store owners, all under the name of Corleone, the mob family that employs him. Sure, they take more than half his cut, but you got to have a family in this kind of business.

Making a handbrake turn that turns the car onto its front left wheel, Jimmy hits the horn a few times. The momentum of his car sends it skidding through a fruit stand and into two pedestrians. But with the local law in his pocket Jimmy has little to worry about, providing he doesn't do it too often. Kicking the car back into gear, he tears across the sidewalk, slams through a bunch of crates, hits the brakes again and swings the back of the car slamming into an intersection. It comes to a halt on the sidewalk. Jimmy gets out and briefly contemplates the damage to his car. It doesn't really matter. Early on in his patron-ship with the Corleones the local cops laid off any grand theft auto charges. Murder and hijacking still gets you some heat, but that's getting better. Still, you tend to like and try get the car somewhere in one piece, especially with all these sporadic gun fights.

Buttoning up his jacket, Jimmy the Badger walks across the street to the flower shop. Another family's gangsters are standing around in front. "Soon that'll be loitering," Jimmy muses. He was called The Badger for his diplomacy skills. As he steps past them and into the shop, one utters a threat. Ignoring it, he walks towards the shop owner, a semi-attractive brunette wearing an apron and gloves.

"This is a tough neighbourhood," Jimmy tells her. "You can really do with the right protection."

"Get outta here!" she says defiantly, "I know important people too." That'll change. The mugs outside still seem content to stay there. Jimmy has a reputation, after all. Using this opportunity to exert some pressure, Jimmy kicks in the two cake displays. The owner gasps, but keeps her stern composure. A punch sends the cash register flying. She steps back a bit, but isn't giving in. "Fine," thinks Jimmy as he grabs her by the throat. If all else fails, maybe a few slaps will help. But as soon as his hand lands on her face, he turns his back. The mugs would react to that and the first one was already on him. Blocking a punch, Jimmy grabs him. A second later the muscle flies through the front display window. The second gangster takes less of a chance and pulls a shotgun from under his coat. Jimmy dives over the counter as lead pellets smash its public face. He pulls his trusty Magnum, recently upgraded with a longer barrel, from his coat. Leaning against the counter, he glances at the assailant. Suddenly he's up and cracks three shots. Two hit the gangster in the chest, sending him stumbling backwards as the Magnum rounds hit. A third cracks his skull and results in instant death.

Jimmy grabs the store owner. She quickly breaks down and agrees to pay him protection instead. The Corleones will be pleased: another property seized from a rival. But the real money is in those behind-the-scene rackets. The thought echoes through Jimmy as he hears the back door unlock. The place was a bit too well defended for a flower shop...

Take all of this, replay it a lot of times, all in the open world of a fictional New York City, and you have a pretty good idea about what The Godfather is about. This brings both disappointment and enjoyment, though. To be honest, going into this review we didn't know what to expect from EA's ambitious license project, arguably the most high profile of the lot. Costing a reported \$20 million, it's a serious deal. The team spoke of a GTA-style world where players have to take control of businesses and rackets, and combat rival

VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R350.00

Developer

Electronic Arts

Publisher

EA Games

Supplier

EA South Africa (011) 516-8300

Genre

Sandbox

Age Restriction

15

Specifications

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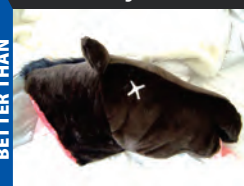
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BOTTOM LINE

Taking a lot of inspiration from GTA, The Godfather loses its way and doesn't do enough with the source material. But as a game it's enjoyable and will keep you entertained for a while. But it's certainly nothing groundbreaking and feels a bit like a wasted opportunity.

75/100

Your horse losing its head



Mafia



gangs for control of the city. A stricter law system and more persistent world would separate it from the gameplay GTA provides, plus the cherry on top would be that the story entwines with the first Godfather movie and Mario Puzo's writing. When playing the game, this part is really obvious. The cast voices are almost all authentic (though Al Pacino is missing), and the game tries hard to entwine itself with this world. If anything, it made us appreciate how violent the movies and the world they inhabit really are. Also, it's been quite a while since *The Godfather* was first released. Today's pop context for the mob is the more violent world of *The Sopranos*. As such, *The Godfather* doesn't hold much back. It's not gory or grotesque – no more than the seventies film – but it certainly is very violent. The world boasts a certain persistence, but when you really look into it, you find it's mostly cosmetic. Being GTA fans, we approached it from that angle. *Godfather* is basically GTA Lite. It represents a more structured approach to the sandbox genre, but it doesn't carry the depth of the GTA series – definitely not the monumental *San Andreas*.

But does it want to? The intent here wasn't to develop a GTA clone, thought unfortunately the similarities are too evident to think anything else. Still, it's more GTA and in that respect it's fairly well done, but with enough stick to give it its own identity. Part of that comes with the association to the source material. There is something interesting to skulking around for the Corleones and do some pretty dirty deeds in order to win the game. There is plenty to do if you follow all the tangents. In terms of missions, the main plot is driven by the central mission. But there are also assassination missions and several hidden sub-missions. For instance, you race to the scene where Sonny gets gunned down and plant the gun Michael uses to avenge his father's attack. But you eliminate Luca Brasi's killer and you hunt down Sonny's assassins as well. In some scenes the character is superimposed

on the movie scene, so it breaks with canon in order to provide more involvement. Just be warned if you are a purist. Still, most of it is authentic and several prominent characters have new dialogue.

The real way to become the Godfather is to control New York. This is done by extorting businesses. All these are marked on the map and divided amongst the five families in town. You start in Little Italy, taking Brooklyn next and so on. Oddly, the main missions and taking over New York don't seem to really encourage each other. At one point, with more than 80% of the main missions completed, we still controlled less than half of the city. But it helps to take over control, because it means cash – and cash brings bonuses. Safe houses give save spots and health, plus some are also armouries. Cash also bribes cops and FBI agents, the latter for when you start a mob war. The main persistent feature is the vendetta points you accumulate against other families. When the bar goes full, that family starts a war with the Corleones. This has to be resolved in less than an hour and involves FBI bribes or blowing up rival businesses. Lose and two of your businesses get blown up.

Mob wars will happen often. Despite mention of a more non-violent approach, most strong-arm tactics to get businesses and rackets will result in fellow gangs taking action. You can reduce heat with stealth tactics, but violence is inevitable. When attacking a rival-controlled warehouse, you are stepping in front of an openly hostile force. Fortunately the combat system is excellent – much better than what GTA has offered console users. The biggest problem becomes the sheer amount of enemies the game has at a location (plus it might be spawning new ones behind your back as well), but the weapon upgrades, skill upgrades (and some retrying) quickly seize an enemy territory for you. It all culminates when you attack a rival family compound. If you succeed, you take over that family

(but not its businesses or units). The assassin missions are another diversion and each carries a substantial cash bonus if you meet the requirements. Stealth combat is actually fun, because it is kept basic. The enemy AI is pretty simple and often, in a pinch, you can simply grab and choke an adversary.

It has its problems, though. The Godfather would have been better if the team gave more attention to the plot in the style *Mafia* approached a game. It's possible to have an open world and have slightly more in-depth scenes. The game seems to rush through the story and adds little substance at the end. It also falls short on interface. Unlike *San Andreas*, cosmetic and clothes changes are not in-game but in the menu screen, which breaks the experience. The city is actually deceptively simple – another GTA hallmark, though its traffic model isn't as robust or interesting. The game lacks the depth that *San Andreas* had with its variety and customisation, and *Mafia* had with its storytelling. Also, while it is artistically impressive and flamboyant (and true to the movies), it is also quite drab. The city hardly brightens up and the game world is actually quite small, so it can get tiresome. It's admirable that the developers wanted to get the hues right, but it still feels drab after a while. Interactivity is minimal and sadly the game manages to push nothing. It only delivers an interesting GTA-cum-Mafia clone that is fun to play, but lost its way somewhere down its development. We had fun and the game surprised us in several ways. But nothing leapt out and made us excited. It certainly didn't inspire the mindless exploration all the GTA titles did, and that is a major failing for this genre.

The Godfather isn't bad. It works well, plays well and has its moments. But it's also a wasted opportunity. Being one thing and classifying itself differently by its story has left the game confused about what its audience should be. Hey, we had fun beating up the locals and families, but unfortunately this has all been done much better before. **NAG**





Make your fantasy mobster and then take to the streets of New York and beat up the locals



TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND

WITHOUT REHASHING AN ALREADY overly-hashed piece of gaming lore, we'll get the Tomb Raider legacy out of the way here and quickly. The first Tomb Raider game was an instant classic: a lone Indiana Jane adventuring through unexplored tombs, hunting down relics and shooting wild animals. It was the stuff of fantasy. The sequel was equally impressive, expanding on the first game without losing any of the essence that made the first so special. From there things went downhill, culminating in Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness, possibly one of the worst games ever created, which resulted in the messy and embarrassing end of an iconic gaming legend. Most thought the Tomb Raider franchise had run its course, with the developer tired and spent and considering another sequel pure madness. But madness is what this industry is all about, and now under a different development outfit (Crystal Dynamics) and lead by one of the original Tomb Raider creators, Toby Gard, Tomb Raider has returned and, barring a few minor niggles, it's everything it promised and more. Lara Croft is back.

GAPS OR CHASMS

Where the first Tomb Raider titles forced players to use their imagination to fill in the gaps left by the generally mediocre quality of graphics back then, this new Tomb Raider leaves little to the imagination with some gorgeous looking environments and a new-look Lara Croft. More polygons, better hardware effects and some snappy game design all conspire to keep you up at night either figuring your way through a puzzle, looking for secrets, or simply trying on new outfits in Lara's bedroom.

It's not only the way Lara looks now that's changed, but also what she's packing. The dual pistols are still there along with a set of hand grenades and instead of somehow magically hiding an armoury of weapons in her backpack, Lara has only one additional weapon slot, usually filled with weapons dropped by the bad guys. In much the same way as James Bond receives various new weapons and gadgets at the start of his current adventure, Lara is also sporting some new kit – a few essential items that no modern self-respecting adventurer should be without. First up is the Personal Light Source. Equipped with a powerful LED, this time-based and rechargeable light will shine the way through those dark tombs. Next up we have a pair of binoculars with a special enhanced mode called 'RAD' (Remote Analysis Device). What this does is signal when you're looking at something that can either move, is physically or chemically unstable or is simply part of some larger mechanical device. This mode is useful for figuring out a few puzzles along the



Note to the developer. Can you please leave out these pointless bike riding bits in the next game?



way, but is really only there for those gamers who have limited experience when it comes to moving stone blocks onto poorly disguised slabs of stone. Anyone who has actually finished any of the previous Tomb Raider games shouldn't bother with it at all. The next interesting toy is the Metallic Grappling Device. In short, it attaches to metallic objects allowing Lara to swing across chasms or grab rewards that are just out of reach. This innovation is rather useful and will immediately remind anyone of a certain bullwhip used by another certain archaeologist. The last item on the list is a PDA (don't worry, it is waterproof). Using the PDA you'll be able to access all the important bits of information, from your mission objectives to how many rewards you've found – a useful toy that highlights just how far Lara Croft has come since her first adventure all those years ago.

Fans of the original will be happy to know that Legend features secrets and hidden areas on all the levels. They fall into three categories: gold, silver and bronze (no prizes for guessing that the bronze rewards are the easiest to find). Unlike the original game and sequels, finding rewards in Legend simply unlocks content such as different outfits to wear and various models and artwork from the game (typical of many console games). In the original game, finding secrets would result in finding essential health and ammunition and considering the relative ease at which most veteran players will play through Legend, these rewards offer little more than a nice diversion away from a tunnel-vision charge through the game. Not as welcome as finding health, but rewarding enough to keep looking, especially considering that you can unlock some rather skimpy outfits which you can try on later in the mansion. One of the better applications of the rewards system comes to light in the mansion. The Croft

mansion is actually an elaborate level in the game complete with hidden passages, pressure switches and cryptic clues. This is a definite bonus in an already stunning title and adds a little bit of polish that completes the experience. As you discover various items in Lara's home, you'll be lead on a chase through the various rooms and areas from one clue to the next, finally unlocking a gold reward – rather satisfying. Although her swimming pool and gym are present, you can't go outside – perhaps for the sequel then.

Traditionally, most Tomb Raider games have been tough to control, so this was one area that the development team placed serious focus on. Playing on both the PlayStation and PC reveals a more refined control system that makes interfacing with the game easy and accessible (no more tragic falls or getting squashed by a boulder). Many of the old moves have returned from the original game, but now the whole process is much smoother. Another unique addition pops up occasionally where players initiate a movie sequence, but instead of simply watching the action, they'll have to press a direction key at critical moments to prevent a messy end to Lara – similar to those old Dragon's Lair games.

Other innovations extend to the level design. Legend features impressive mechanical systems on most of the levels that require a set number of blocks moved, pulleys pulled or switches switched. Next to chasm leaping and cliff climbing, these devices form a large part of completing levels. Each level has a different theme and graphical style and this extends to all of the various devices. Overall, most of the game looks and feels the part and everything fits well into the theme of whatever area you're exploring, imparting an authentic touch to an already very atmospheric game.

VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PC

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R299.00

Developer

Crystal Dynamics

Publisher

Eidos

Supplier

WWE [011] 462-0150

Genre

Adventure

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

CPU: Pentium III 1.0GHz

Video: 64MB graphics card

RAM: 256MB RAM

HDD: 9.9GB free HDD space

CD/DVD: DVD-ROM

Internet: Not Required

Players: 1

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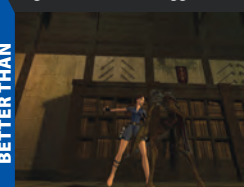
BOTTOM LINE

Crystal Dynamics has achieved what many would have thought impossible by giving gamers exactly what they've been waiting for all these years – a rock solid Tomb Raider sequel. If you're a fan of the franchise, get this without hesitation (on any platform). It's like going back in time without the crazy scientist.

92/100

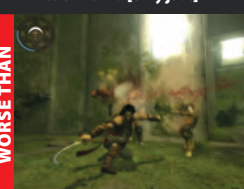
Angel of Darkness [snigger]

BETTER THAN



Prince of Persia [only just]

WORSE THAN



You can still shoot animals and explore expansive levels. Pure Tomb Raiding at its best

CLOSE TO PERFECT

Depending on your level of experience with the Tomb Raider franchise, some of the following comments might hit home, but considering that everyone's experience is different, some may seem moot. This is also all for the inevitable next Tomb Raider game. Think of it as a bitch slash wish list.

Firstly, although some gamers might enjoy a break from climbing ledges and shooting things, we don't need dull and pointless ride-a-motorbike-and-shoot-other-guys-on-motorbikes sessions to 'break the monotony'. Make the game much harder or add tougher elements for those wishing to explore further, rewarding them with secret items or a quicker path through some sections. Tomb Raider Legend is far too easy to complete and therefore seems a little short at the end, although hunting for that elusive gold reward does add some longevity. If the game was harder, then finding secret items such as health and ammunition would be really rewarding. It's tough to set the difficulty high when you're aiming the game at such a wide audience, but surely the developers can design it in such a way that more experienced players can

opt to really test their skills with more complex level design and multiple paths through most levels. Although the developers removed the grid-based level design, each level is still full of obvious ledges, steps and poles to leap from and to. Why not evolve this to include entire sections of wall that players can move across, deciding where and when to make that leap, from one rock face to another, for example? Legend still technically uses a grid-based system, but it's now much more forgiving. Expand the number of moves available and bring back sprinting and jumping left and right facing the same direction. Although the mansion was fun to explore, we need to be able to go outside and explore the grounds. Everyone knows about the hedge maze outside as well as an underground treasure bunker and outdoor gym – perfect for the sequel as previously mentioned. Less shooting of people and more shooting of crocodiles and wolves is required. Animal rights activists will just have to laugh it off as fantasy game content instead of taking issue. At least we're shooting crocodiles and not pandas. One of the

things that made the first game so great was that isolated feeling, just you against the tomb, dangerous animals and crafty traps. This leads back to riding bikes and shooting thugs. Most players would rather go up against mutant mummies, impassable mountain ledges and wild gorillas. If we wanted to shoot people, we'd buy any other game on the shelf. Finally, how about adding a map system geared around either following a map or creating one as you go? Various paths could lead to nothing while others could be an alternative way to complete the level in

question. Leaving unexplored sections of maps is certainly an enticing lure for replaying some levels.

Most of these gripes are subjective and the game, as it stands, is an exceptional experience. The developers should consider it a compliment when hordes of fans are demanding improvements like this. After all is said and done, perhaps the best thing about Tomb Raider Legend is that it's doing well enough both commercially and critically to ensure a sequel in the near future, and that means an opportunity to get feedback and perhaps add more to the game. Crystal Dynamics and Eidos have a winner on their hands here and the most important thing at the end of the day, and after completing the game, is that you'll feel like you've just come through an exhausting adventure you'll not likely forget in a hurry, and that's exactly what everyone wants for the time, money and effort they invest in any game. **NAG**

This sums up the experience perfectly, and the best part is that it's a screenshot



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VITAL INFO

Platforms

(Reviewed on PS2)

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R399

Developer

EA Sports

Publisher

Electronic Arts

Supplier

EA Africa [011] 516-8300

Genre

Sport

Age Restriction

16+

Specifications

Players: 1-2

Online: No

Controllers: 2

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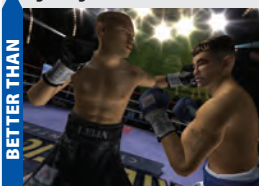
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BOTTOM LINE

A superb refinement of its predecessor, *Fight Night Round 3* does well to make the play dynamic more faithful to the actual sport, and makes the game far more balanced and enjoyable. Great graphics and audio round off the package. This is a title boxing fans won't want to miss.

83/100

Fight Night Round 2



Ringside seats to the Thrilla in Manila



FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3

EA SPORTS SEEMED TO have a solid monopoly over the boxing game genre since the introduction of the *Fight Night* franchise, but fortunately it seems that the company is still making an effort to improve the titles, rather than simply resting on its laurels. Having said that, it also needs to be stated that *Fight Night Round 3* in no way makes the kind of revolutionary advances that *Fight Night Round 2* made over the original title, but it certainly does well to iron out many flaws of the previous title, and it ultimately makes for a realistic and rewarding recreation of the sport.

In addition to standard match-ups, allowing you to pit any of the extensive roster of real life boxers against one another, *Fight Night Round 3* offers a number of modes of play. Chief amongst these is the career mode, though in some ways this is one of the more disappointing aspects of this title. The career mode allows you to create your own boxer from scratch, or pick a real-life pugilist and guide his career from the amateur class all the way up to world championship level. Unfortunately, however, the

create-a-boxer mode seems to be somewhat scaled down from the previous version, with a reduced degree of customisation available for facial and other features (this version also scraps the EyeToy support). Nonetheless, it's still quite extensive in its own right, though it would've been nice to see some expansion on last year's effort.

The second major shortcoming of the career mode is that it lacks any real feeling of continuity. It lacks any form of ranking ladder, and it pits you against opponents in a seemingly random fashion, until you've built up a 'popularity meter' to the point where the game gives you a shot at a certain title or endorsement. Nonetheless, the career mode offers about 60 bouts, as you make your way through various weight classes and win the championships. Along the way you'll face off against generic created boxers, as well as both modern-day and legendary boxers.

The roster of talent in *Fight Night Round 3* is, in fact, quite



extensive, with boxers like Roy Jones Jr, James Toney and Oscar de la Hoya making appearances, as well as the inclusion of legends like the Sugar Rays (both Robinson and Leonard), Marvellous Marvin Hagler, Muhammed Ali, Joe Frazier and others. A few notable boxers are conspicuous by their absence, but this doesn't detract too much from the overall experience.

Tied in with the roster of legendary boxers is the *ESPN Classic* mode, which allows you to recreate classic fights such as Ali vs. Frazier, Robinson vs. Lamotta, Gatti vs. Ward and others. Unfortunately, though, the history of these rivalries is never really expanded on, aside from very short documentary-style introductory clips.

In addition to the above, the 'Hard Hits' mode also makes its return, allowing you to fight through 15 un-timed rounds, with each round ending only when one of the boxers is knocked down. It's been seen before, but it still provides a refreshing change of pace.

The play dynamic, however, is the site of the most major reworking of the title, and it takes all the most successful aspects of the previous titles and superbly merges them to create what is the best recreation of the sport yet. Once again, the 'Total Punch Control mechanic', which uses the right analogue stick to throw punches, makes a return, and it is once again quite successful, though it may take newcomers a while to get used to it. The most notable addition to the play dynamic of *Fight Night Round 2* was the haymaker punch which, while a good concept, served largely only to unbalance the game.

This time around, the haymakers make a return and are, in fact, even more powerful than before, but they take far longer to execute and leave your boxer highly vulnerable before they land, allowing sufficient time for them to be spotted and countered. Should you land one of these punches, it certainly imparts a great advantage to you in the fight, but the risk factor involved is sufficient to ensure against any abuse.

Over and above the 'run of the mill' haymakers, two more powerful haymaker punches have been added. The 'Flash KO' and 'Stun Punch' are executed in a similar manner as the ordinary haymaker, but require a longer wind-up on the right analogue stick, meaning that they take even longer to properly perform. Should the 'Flash KO' land, it gives you an opportunity to score an immediate knockdown on your opponent - irrespective of the amount of health he has remaining. It seldom pays off, but it works nicely as a 'last ditch' effort for a fighter who's close to defeat to get back into the fight. The 'Stun Punch', if it lands, shifts the game into a first-person perspective, from the point of view of the defending fighter, which supposedly confers an advantage to the attacker, though it usually serves only to disorientate the players. It was a good idea, but the execution leaves something to be desired, and one can only hope that this will be reworked in the next instalment.

Another notable change to the play dynamic is the reintroduction of the clinch move, allowing a boxer on the receiving end of a flurry to hold onto his opponent for a few seconds, allowing him to regain some stamina and health, and to put some distance between the combatants when the referee restarts the fight. Another innovation is the introduction of different fighting and blocking styles. You can now choose between slower styles with more powerful punches, or styles that punch faster, but with less force. There are also different blocking styles available, including, in addition to the classic style, a crossed-arms style, and the Philly Shell defence. Some blocking styles allow more time to parry and counter punches, at

the expense of taking more damage from blocked shots. These changes, in addition to the reworked haymaker mechanism, make for a slower paced game that is more faithful to the actual sport. While it remains exciting, it truly showcases the difference in fighting styles between boxers, adding a strategic element to the action.

The visuals show a slight improvement over the title's predecessor, with well-designed stadiums, lively crowds, and increasing degrees of bruising, swelling and cuts as fights progress. Commentary is once again provided by *ESPN's* Joe Tessitore, and seems to be faster and more accurate than in previous versions. The soundtrack is fairly comprehensive, if somewhat scaled down from the last title in the series. To its credit, EA Sports has done superbly with the sound effects, to the extent that the thudding impact of leather against facial tissue has an almost sickeningly real quality to it, adding to the realism of the title's presentation.

All in all, *Fight Night Round 3* is not revolutionary, but manages to refine the playing experience to create what is undoubtedly the most faithful recreation of the sport to date, and is sure to please boxing aficionados, though the slow pace may not appeal to fans of traditional fighting titles. **NAG**

If there was any doubt about the faces boxers pull during a match...



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R199

Developer

Virtual Life

Publisher

Electronic Arts

Supplier

EA Africa [011] 516-8300

Genre

Simulation

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

CPU: Intel Pentium III 1.0GHz

Video: T&L-capable graphics card with 32MB of video RAM

RAM: 256MB RAM

HDD: 1.5GB free hard drive space

CD/DVD: 8x CD-ROM

Internet: Not required

Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Open for Business is, without a doubt, one of the best expansions in the series so far and a good pick to add to your collection if you're a Sims fan.

82/100

Sims 2 Nightlife

BETTER THAN

Sims 2 University

WORSE THAN



Yes! Now your Sim can be his or her own wage slave! Long hours! Debt! Ingratitude!



SIMS 2 OPEN FOR BUSINESS

LOVE THEM OR HATE them, the world's most famous simulated people are back to add a new expansion title to their ever growing list of successes, and this one definitely won't disappoint fans. Sims 2 Open for Business, as the title suggests, is centred on the idea of the Sims starting and running their own company with the ultimate goal of creating a big business empire. Your Sims now have the opportunity to get out of any one-track career path and build their dream from the ground up, making life a little more interesting and much more fun.

And there's plenty to get them started because the creators have happily crammed a whole lot of goodness into this single disk expansion, including a new shopping district (complete with wealthy tycoons and growing home industries alike, ready for your Sim to compete with for customers) and the option of creating your own district, for those who want to flex a bit more creative power. Expect long loading times when travelling between community lots, unless you have a monster machine which can keep up with all the happenings in Sim-Ville.

Even though the franchise is working on promoting custom content in its games, providing players with the Body Shop specifically designed to make it easy for the average gamer to create their own stuff, this expansion does come with several fresh furniture styles and with some interesting new outfits to dress your Sims. The new clothes are mostly themed so that players can dress their employees in anything they fancy, from a full knight's costume to a slinky ninja outfit or even a chef's suit, so as to create an exclusive shopping experience to entice new customers and win the favour of the undercover reviewers. New objects include a lemonade stand, giant teddy bear statue, and a variety of workbenches, which the Sims can use to create an assortment of interesting items, allowing them to easily start their own home industry while earning skill points and, thankfully, having fun.

Designed not to be simply child's play, Open for Business really does challenge players to truly learn the art of balancing work and play for their Sims. The intricacies of this new title offer an experience unique from others in the series and it's a good idea, if you're not a manual-reading type, to swallow your pride and turn on the in-game hints the first time you let your Sims loose in their own shop. The hints and manual help to fully explain the new control panel that appears in the top right corner, as soon as you enter your own business premises. The purpose of the control panel is to give the player more control and information relating to the running of the shop and includes a cost and profit breakdown and customer satisfaction ratings, which are vital to keep in the gold if you want to earn any perks at all.

Unfortunately the panel cannot be used to deal with employees, though it does list all the relevant details and skills associated with each staff member. Interaction between management and staff can be frustratingly clumsy and, sadly, time consuming. There is no way to directly deal with the staff members, and therefore players must direct their Sim to change the employee's assignments, adjust wages and allow breaks. In a game where time is money, this is unacceptable.

Fortunately, there's a great deal to work towards and aim for in this title over and above the goals your Sim already has, which makes the game that much more addictive. Sims that have earned points in a related skill, can now also earn different level talent badges, allowing them to improve their work skills, ensure smoother running of the business, and even earn some exciting company perks.

Sims 2 Open for Business offers a whole new and totally absorbing aspect to the already brilliant series which will keep Sim fans immersed in the logistics for months to come - or at least until the next expansion appears on the shelves. **NAG**



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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	GCN

■ Suggested Retail Price

R399

■ Developer

EA Sports BIG

■ Publisher

Electronic Arts

■ Supplier

Ster Kinekor [011] 445-7900

■ Genre

Sport

■ Age Restriction

3+

■ Specifications

Online: No

Controllers: 1 - 4

Players: 1-2; 1-4 with multimap

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BOTTOM LINE

This may not impress true soccer enthusiasts, but the fast paced play, impressive visuals and reasonable audio make this fun while it lasts.

62/100

FIFA STREET 2

THE SEQUEL TO THE at-best mediocre *FIFA Street* has arrived, and brought with it a number of refinements to the play dynamic that make for a more entertaining and varied experience, though the game has yet to do for soccer what the *NBA Street* series has done for basketball.

The basic premise of the game remains unchanged: it's all about four-on-four street soccer, with the emphasis more on trickery with the ball than on actually scoring any goals. In fact, many of the game modes available are determined entirely by scoring trick-points, with goals being completely disregarded. Fortunately, though, with the return of EA Big's 'Trick Stick' system, these tricks are fairly easy to pull off, and it soon becomes quite a simple matter to string together fairly impressive combo moves. Nonetheless, although the play dynamic is initially quite entertaining, tedium sets in before long, especially since many of the trick moves initiate unavoidable two-character animation sequences that effectively render the defending player paralysed for the duration of the trick, which disrupts the flow of the game.

The other major shortcoming of *FIFA Street 2* is that although the trick system is fairly well implemented, the underlying soccer dynamic just isn't all that entertaining. When you strip away the trick element, the actual soccer is quite dull and uninspiring. In terms of presentation, the visuals (character models and animation in particular) are very well done, and the game boasts a vast soundtrack that should cater to most tastes. It also allows you to put together your own play list from the roughly 50 tracks



on offer.

As a light-hearted, trick-orientated take on the sport, *FIFA Street 2* succeeds, even if it does become repetitive fairly soon. Though as a serious soccer title, there are better alternatives available. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

■ Suggested Retail Price

R399

■ Developer

Team 17

■ Publisher

Sony Computer Entertainment Europe

■ Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900

■ Genre

Puzzle

■ Age Restriction

3+

■ Specifications

Memory: 224KB

Wireless: No

Online: Yes

Game Sharing: Yes

Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Quick time-base levels, coupled with some of the most confounding puzzles in existence, make this sweet blend of fun and addiction something everyone should try.

86/100



LEMMINGS

GAMING LEGACY GOES PORTABLE with the PSP version of *Lemmings*. First released in 1991 on the Commodore Amiga, this title changed everything with its frantic play, tough puzzles and addictive frustration.

The principle is simple: a set number of lemmings drop from a trap door in the sky (at variable intervals) and head across the level, stopping for nothing. If they encounter any of the level hazards such as water, a tall ledge or trap, they expire. Although you don't directly control any lemmings, you must guide them to safety without losing too many along the way, by assigning unique abilities to individual lemmings (examples include dig, climb and build). The hard part is figuring out which ability to assign when and where, while trying to figure out each progressively tougher level. Assign any of these abilities to a particular lemming, and it'll carry out its task until it can't anymore (running out of



building material or hitting a metal wall for example). Using a combination of these abilities players must guide the lemmings to the exit.

The control system is a little finicky considering the limitations of PSP controls compared to the precision of a mouse, but after working through the first ten or so levels, this problem tends to fade. The PSP version also includes a level editor that's initially cumbersome to use, but with some dedication and patience you'll be able to design some of your own levels and upload them for others to play. *Lemmings* on the PSP is a genuinely fabulous way to pass the time, if a little frustrating, as some of the levels initially defy sanity and reason – until you get to them, that is. If you've played *Lemmings* to death by now, this version offers little more than a slick portable version of one of the best games ever conceived. **NAG**



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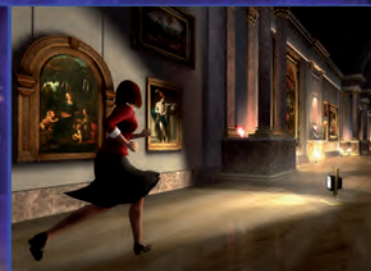
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VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R479

Developer

Red Storm

Publisher

Ubisoft

Supplier

MegaRom [011] 234-2680

Genre

Tactical FPS

Age Restriction

16+

Specifications

Online: No

Controllers: 1

Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Unfortunately for PlayStation 2 owners, the magic of the *Ghost Recon* franchise has yet to be faithfully recreated. Shoddy controls, dismal graphics and a very linear play dynamic make this title yet another uninspired and often downright annoying first-person shooter.

39/100

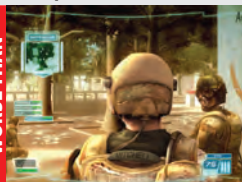
Delta Force: Black Hawk Down

BETTER THAN



Ghost Recon series (Other platforms)

WORSE THAN



TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

TOM CLANCY AND UBISOFT'S *Ghost Recon* series, now in its third instalment, has impressed fans of PC and Xbox tactical shooters since its inception. The previous games in the series have also been released for the PS2, but they've never quite come close to the high standards set by the other platforms, and it seems that this tradition has, sadly, been continued with *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*.

The storyline sees you controlling the leader of a squad of 'Ghosts', the US Army's most elite soldiers. You've been sent to help control an uprising in Mexico City, which soon progresses to kidnapped presidents, missing nuclear weapons, and the like. Of course, as these problems develop it's your job to fix them, and as such the game does very well to keep things varied and interesting. In fact, it's probably the best aspect of the title.

The play dynamic is where things begin to come apart at the seams, however. Although the game is a 'tactical' shooter, your squad simply consists of yourself and one team-mate, scaled down from the three or four other subordinates in the other versions of this title. This somewhat diminishes the 'tactical' aspect of the game. Even your lone squad-mate proves difficult enough to order around. To his credit, though, he's tough as nails, trigger happy, and has an almost impeccable aim. In fact, you can simply hide behind a corner whilst sending your lackey to clear out an entire area of enemies for you.

Perhaps the only enemy that your team-mate cannot help you to overcome is the game's clumsy controls. You're given little control over the speed at which your character moves, and typical stealth game elements like peeking around a corner are impossible to perform. To make matters worse, should you try to do some of the shooting yourself, the poor analogue stick sensitivity makes it a hassle to even aim your weapon.

The frustration doesn't end here, however. Due to the relatively small levels, your objectives generally involve trekking back and forth from end to end, which soon becomes quite repetitive. Compounding the problem is the almost ubiquitous slowing of the

framerate, particularly when you're faced with multiple enemies at a time. Speaking of enemies, they're somewhat disappointing too. Once again, artificial intelligence is the stumbling block, with the enemy characters having absolutely no instinct for self-preservation, making them far too easy to dispatch of.

Graphically, *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* continues to underperform. Jerky animation and environmental textures that are severely lacking in detail are the order of the day. In addition, the heads-up display, designed to provide you with continuous useful information throughout your mission, is occupied mainly by a too-small mini-map and more substandard animations, this time of superiors handing out orders. The audio, however, is mostly passable, with good voice acting, better-than-average effects, and a decent score.

All in all, in spite of a solid premise, the latest PS2 title in the *Ghost Recon* series once again proves quite disappointing. A poor control scheme and play dynamic, combined with substandard visuals, make for a title that is more frustrating than fun, and leaves one feeling that the developers cut out a massive chunk of the game just to get it to fit within the limitations of the PS2 hardware. The result feels sloppy, rushed, and not in the least entertaining. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R199

Developer

Eugen Systems

Publisher

Atari

Supplier

MegaRom [011] 234-2680

Genre

RTS

Age Restriction

16+

Specifications

CPU: Intel Pentium 4 1.5GHz or AMD

Athlon 1500+

Video: DirectX 9.0c compatible ATI

Radeon 8500 or NVIDIA GeForce FX 5700 graphics card

RAM: 256MB RAM

HDD: 7.0GB free HDD space + 5GB for Act of War

CD/DVD: 4x DVD-ROM

Internet: Not required but supported

Players: 1-8

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BOTTOM LINE

A great single-player experience that suffers somewhat from certain bugs. Let's hope for a patch soon! Multiplayer lacks strategic depth. In other regards, this is a very enjoyable game, particularly from a cinematic point of view. This title is very strong on story and atmosphere.

66/100



ACT OF WAR: HIGH TREASON

ACT OF WAR: DIRECT Action made quite a splash when it was released about a year ago. The game displayed great attention to production quality, with an interesting and engrossing storyline presented by means of live-acted video cut scenes. It also featured a very high level of challenge, which was a most welcome break from prevailing trends. This expansion pack, High Treason, which arrived with little hype or fanfare, doesn't ignore the precedents set by the base game.

Once again we are presented with a high-tension thriller of a story. We shan't spoil any plot elements for you by going into the story, as this game is very strong on story and this is an important part of the experience. Once again, this is conveyed by means of frequent and well-produced video scenes, including 'picture-in-picture-style' presentation during the course of missions. The pace is maintained by not breaking continuity with pre-mission briefings and post-mission debriefings. The action runs directly from one mission to the next.

Although the graphics have not been hugely enhanced since the original title, and even though some may say that they are becoming somewhat dated, the game is still visually stunning. This has been achieved, in part, by ambitious use of large-scale particle effects, such as massive fires with huge, billowing clouds of smoke. The quality of the video cut scenes has been upgraded somewhat, mainly from a directorial, artistic perspective.

The game has not gotten any easier. In fact, if anything, many missions are even tougher than those in *Direct Action*. However, this is not entirely a good thing, at least not the way in which it has been achieved. Many of the missions are tricky in an irritating sort of way, rather than as a result of strategic or tactical depth. Furthermore, some random bugs occasionally aggravate this situation.

As usual, this add-on presents several new elements. Firstly, each faction gains a couple of new units. Furthermore, naval combat has been expanded. A new type of unit has been introduced, namely mercenaries. Although the units themselves are much like many others, it is in terms of the economics of acquiring and retaining them that they differ from the rest. Mercenaries are not trained, but hired, so an entire squad arrives simultaneously at a designated location. Hired mercenaries require upkeep. Every few seconds, a fee is paid to the mercenary company, until such time as it is either destroyed or dismissed. Multiplayer functionality has been upgraded with a few minor tweaks and new options, as well as by the addition of many new maps.

Direct Action's foremost problem persists in its expansion. The unit interactions are rather simple. They aren't varied or interesting enough to carry this game in multiplayer, which is a major consideration for many prospective players. **NAG**



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VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

N/A

Developer

Pseudo Interactive

Publisher

SEGA Europe

Supplier

N/A

Genre

Racing/Action

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

Online: Yes

Players: 1



Crash and burn! High power weapons on these cars is impractical, but fun!

FULL AUTO

GAME IDEAS SEEM TO come in cycles. Each iteration of hardware sees a repeat of the more popular genres from the previous generation. Sometimes, a genre may fall by the wayside, only to return a few generations later. *Deathtrack* (1989) and *Hi-Octane* (1995) are two examples of leap-frog genres, games with distinct styles that only see a clone repeat now and then.

Full Auto finally pays homage to the 1989 classic and the 1995 gaming box-office hit, but only older gamers will realise this. Everyone else will look at Full Auto and see *Burnout Revenge* with guns, but that is by no means a terrible thing.

Unabashed, Full Auto doesn't even try to hide its inspirations. The road arrows denoting turns and even the takedown sounds seem ripped right out of *Burnout*. The 'slow motion' animation that plays when you blow up an opponent teeters precariously on infringing on what *Burnout* has built up over the years, but it's all forgiven the moment you plough into your first building.

The 'thing' about Full Auto is the destructibility of the environment. Sure, most racing games have some level of interactivity with the road and surrounding buildings – Full Auto just takes it to the next level.

To say that you can level the city wouldn't be a gross overstatement at all. You literally can bring down buildings, topple statues and cause tankers to explode so hard that your teeth are likely to vibrate. Full Auto really lets you bring down the house, but it's not all just for show.

Proper placement of a missile can cause a rocky overhang to collapse onto opponents. Spraying a building with machinegun fire may actually cause it to topple over, changing how you approach the track.

Naturally, in such a destructible environment one becomes concerned with making too big a mistake. Shoot the wrong thing, and you could get stuck between a rock and a hard place. Fear not, for Full Auto includes yet another blatant gimmick, just a damn handy one.

Destroy enough stuff, and you build up your Unwreck meter. This bar denotes how much you can rewind time – *Prince of Persia* in a car if you will. The Unwreck function is surprisingly awesome, something one quickly becomes very thankful for. You know how you always take a turn badly in a racing game when you don't know the track that well? Just rewind time and try the corner again. This frees up some frustration to spend on taking out opponents with whatever weapon set you've chosen.



Progression unlocks new races, new weapon sets (front and rear combinations), new cars and new colours for cars. There are over ten play-modes spanning the 60-event career - much variety for a game that is essentially about blowing up cars and rewinding time. The most interesting game-mode is actually the 'there and back again' race-type. First you race down one direction. At the end of the track you have to turn around and face a full volley of followers, as well as whatever damage you did to the track on your way over.

The entire presentation comes across in beautiful next-generation HDR with all the expected bells and whistles. The visuals, augmented with a stunning show-reel replay system and one-touch instant replay, make for sufficient eye-candy, enough spare to hand out to kids.

Most games should be so lucky to get all these features into one title: the Unwreck, the detailed destructible environments and the host of game-types. The trade-off for all this, at least from virgin developer Pseudo, is a slightly 'rough around the edges' game. Everything works beautifully, but you can't help but feel Pseudo bit off more than it could chew. Here and there you'll notice the occasional stutter, and every now and then you'll notice a bit of slowdown or an odd camera-angle - little things, but noticeable.

If one overlooks these little things, you have a high-octane death track: a game with enough explosions, cinematic crashes and stunning shortcut-taking (via convenient rewind) to make even Hollywood seem a bit tame.

Pseudo did a good job and could've probably not bothered with the tacked-on story. It's a real laughable script of 'future city Staunton is held hostage and you, the player, as a retired driver has to challenge the terrorists to various lethal street races'. The thought is cute, but as various movie directors have already found, when you have guns, explosions, special effects and cars being mangled, you really don't need a plot. **NAG**

BOTTOM LINE

For older gamers: Full Auto is a next-generation *Deathtrack*.

For younger gamers: Full Auto is *Burnout* with guns.

80/100

Hi-Octane (PC)



Deathtrack (PC)





Look serious, wear a flashlight and draw with chalk - forensics is a tough job

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R199

Developer

Telltale Games

Publisher

Ubisoft

Supplier

Megarom [011] 234-2680

Genre

Adventure

Age Restriction

16+

Specifications

CPU: Pentium III 1GHz

Video: 64MB graphics card

RAM: 256MB RAM

HDD: 1.4GB free hard drive space

CD/DVD: 4x CD/DVD-ROM

Internet: Not required

Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

CSI: 3 Dimensions of Murder tries to do what the TV series has been successfully achieving for the last few years, but it becomes evident that it's more enjoyable to watch the show than actually participating in it. This game is enjoyable for the first few hours after which it becomes rather tedious, as you will often repeat the same processes to solve a crime.

65/100

CSI: 3 DIMENSIONS OF MURDER

THE CSI GAME FRANCHISE has never really created a mark on the gaming market simply because it never offered anything exceptional for gamers. CSI: 3 Dimensions of Murder is the third title in this series and even though it now boasts 3D gameplay, the graphics are still mediocre in comparison to what we can expect from most other games available today.

If you are familiar with the TV series, then you will recognise some of the characters who make appearances in this game. These include Gill Grissom (head of the CSI department), Catherine Willows and Jim Brass. In CSI: 3 Dimensions of Murder you take the role of an intern assigned to the graveyard shift of the Las Vegas Crime Lab. After a brief tutorial you are given your first assignment: to solve the murder of a woman who was killed in an art gallery (the game features three cases that need to be solved).

Your job entails looking for evidence, analysing the evidence, and interviewing witnesses. For the most part the game is relatively simple, and it's not too difficult to find and analyse evidence as anything you can pick up glows when your mouse hovers over it. You therefore cannot incorrectly analyse evidence. Every time you collect evidence that is identified, it is added to the Evidence Trinity. This is basically a triangle that ties together suspects and evidence, and once the trinity is complete you have your killer.

Throughout the game you have to constantly go back to the crime scene or re-interview the witnesses as you uncover more clues. Looking at the graphics and the sound of the game, these aren't bad but could have been a lot better. The so-called '3D gameplay' is rather poor, but the sound isn't too bad as it features the voices of the original cast. If you enjoy the CSI TV series, then this game should appeal to you, but be warned: this game loses its appeal very quickly. **NAG**



PSP



syphonfilter DARK MIRROR



INFILTRATE. RECON. EXECUTE.
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GAME

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VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

Glu

Publisher

Glu

Supplier

Thumbtribe

Genre

Speed platform

Download Code

SMS: tribe 703222 to 40014

NB: make sure you leave a space after the word **tribe**.Check www.thumbtribe.co.za for phone compatibility and downloading instructions..

ICE AGE 2

WHAT DO YOU WANT in a game? Some depth or a straight-forward puzzle? The Ice Age 2 game doesn't even deliver that much.

You assume the role of one of the characters and then simply slide down slopes, collecting acorns. You need a certain amount of acorns to pass a level. There are snow and cave levels, and obstacles such as rocks and rolling snowballs get in your way. Hit a steep slope and you have to run; see an obstacle and you have to jump. It has one theme song and the levels generally look the same. The controls aren't even very responsive. To be honest, it's not nearly worth the asking price. This is clearly a cash-in on the movie. The other characters only feature occasionally and aren't playable. All you do is pick up nuts and avoid fairly non-threatening obstacles. **NAG**

All you do is slide, slide, slide **60/100**



GET RICH OR DIE TRYIN'

BECOME THE NUMBER ONE rapper on the scene within three years: that's the challenge behind this game, based on the *50 Cent* movie vehicle of the same name. But Fathammar has done a good job giving mobile players something with more depth than usual. Fans of *New York Nights* will be familiar with the concept of guiding a character through choices in a game. The majority of the action is in rhythm-game Rap challenges, while combat is a simple point-and-shoot affair. Buy bling, impress the ladies, record hit songs and try to reach for the stars. It's a bit more involved than it appears and is worth replaying at least once to get the full experience. **NAG**

An interesting life-sim **70/100**

YEAR 1, FEB, WEEK 2/4



SELECT

MENU

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

Fathammar

Publisher

Fathammar

Supplier

Thumbtribe

Genre

RPG

Download Code

SMS: tribe 703183 to 40014

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YEAR 1, JUL, WEEK 2/4



HANNA DISS SOMEONE?

E-DOG

SELECT

BACK

VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

Mobile Scope

Publisher

Mobile Scope

Supplier

Thumbtribe

Genre

Platformer

Download Code

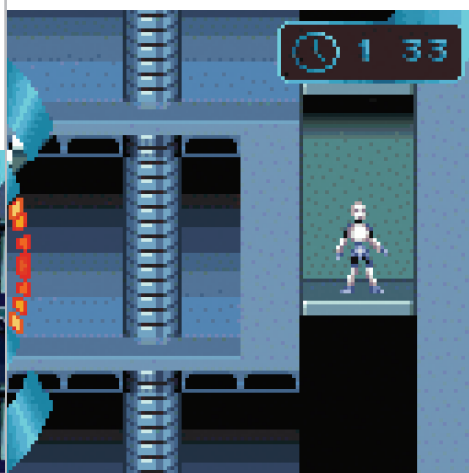
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I, ROBOT

STILL AROUND EVEN THOUGH the movie has come and gone, I, Robot hands players control of three characters, each with different abilities. The robot can beat up other robots, the scientist can hide from them and the cop can stun them or use his gun (though bullets are limited). It's very similar to *Elevator Action*, but the dynamic doesn't change and the opponents don't do much – except in combat, where the controls are slow. Finishing the game will unlock some mini-games that will keep players going, but in the end the overall game is lacklustre and uninspired. Enemies and locations never change much and each level involves the same approach. It's not incredibly tough either and can be finished in one short sitting. **NAG**

Dull and not challenging **55/100**



SABRE WOLF

THIS POPULAR PLATFORM TITLE has ported quite well to mobile phones. Playing as an archaeology professor, players head out to recover an artefact stolen by Sabre Wolf. An artefact is at the end of each level, but the catch is that you have to run back to your tent before Sabre Wolf catches you. On the way, the enemies you vanquished have turned into coins – the more coins you get, the faster you run. There are also pieces of a medallion spread across the game – collect all of these and you can banish the bad guy from where he came from.

IT'S ENTERTAINING AND ADDICTIVE, though the cartoon-like graphics might be a bit much for some people. Still, it is fun to play in short bursts, plus the game is different enough to feel completely like a run-of-the-mill platformer. **NAG**

A fun, different platformer **75/100**



VITAL INFO

Platforms

PC	PS2	PS3	PSP
XBOX	360	DS	MOB

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

In-Fusio

Publisher

In-Fusio

Supplier

Thumbtribe

Genre

Platformer

Download Code

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R50 games (R20+R30) NB: Make sure you leave a space between the word tribe and the code

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R20 games

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R10 games

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9 Sagem MyX5-2 MyC5-2	10 Nokia 6230i	11 Nokia 3100 3200 3300 5100 6100 6220 6230 6610 6800 6820 7210 7250 7250i	12 Nokia 6600 6260 6670 6680 7610	13 Nokia 3230 3650 7650 NGage	14 Nokia 3510i		
15 Motorola C650 V180 V220	16 Motorola V300 V500 V600	17 Motorola V547 V550 V620 V975 V980	18 Motorola V3 V80 E398 E550 E1000	19 Sony Ericsson F500i K500 K700 S700i V800	20 Sony Ericsson T610 T630 Z600		

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BUDGET GAMES

HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC IV

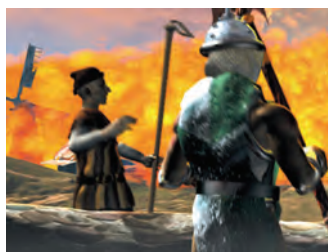
DEVELOPER: New World Computing
PUBLISHER: 3DO
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234-2680
GENRE: Turn-based strategy
PLATFORM: PC
RRP: R99

THE *HEROES OF MIGHT & Magic* series hasn't quite had the bad luck *Might & Magic* has seen, so while the fourth game didn't impress fans to the extent that the second and third ones did, it wasn't regarded as a bad entry to the series. The main problem was with the changes made between the third and fourth game. Some were for the better, but most aggravated fans.

Still, it wasn't bad, plus it received two expansions. These didn't add much to change the game for the better, but collectively they added a good amount of new features, maps and monsters, not to mention a few extra campaigns. The big question is whether you are a *Heroes of Might & Magic* fan or not. This is a good purchase if you want to experience the *Heroes of Might & Magic* turn-based strategy/RPG hybrid, especially because it includes the two expansions. With *Heroes of Might & Magic V* around the corner, this can be a good chance to get into the series and see if you enjoy it. **NAG**



It's not the best, but HOMM IV is still a fun game



FLATOUT

DEVELOPER: Bugbear Entertainment
PUBLISHER: Empire
DISTRIBUTOR: WWE [011] 462-0150
GENRE: Racing
PLATFORM: PC
RRP: R59

FLATOUT HOPED TO BE the *Half-Life 2* of racing games, bringing physics into the arena of off-road racing. It didn't quite succeed, but it wasn't far off the mark. The crazy racing antics make for a lot of fun, especially in multiplayer, while mid-range machines will run it well.

Taking charge of a muscle car, players complete a career mode racing around dirt tracks. The difference is that anything around the track is interactive and can be slammed into. The cars also take real-time damage, and accidents can be spectacular. As players progress, they buy better parts for their cars and aim for the top spot. Races are dispersed with destruction derby arenas, plus the tracks are creative and varied. But in the end, the real fun lies in using the stuff around the track as a way to win the race. Obstacles can hold back the competition, who will slam into you and force you off the track if need be.

If that gets tiresome, the mini-games are fun. Hurl your driver towards a giant target, over a sand pit or over a high vault line to get a top score. The mini-games support multiple players as well. At the price that you can pick this up for, it's definitely worth getting. **NAG**



Taking a flying leap is what Flatout is really about



BUDGET TOP 20



JAK 3

DEVELOPER: Naughty Dog
PUBLISHER: SCEE
DISTRIBUTOR: SK Games [011] 445-7960
GENRE: Platform
PLATFORM: PS2
RETAIL PRICE: R199

IT'S A MUCH HARDER world that Jak and Daxter find themselves in – one that has shifted the series into fairly mature ground. Brandishing a 'Teen rating', it's a far cry from *Jak & Daxter's* 'all Ages' approval. But this doesn't detract from what is otherwise an excellent game. The series evolved to a new graphical level, plus the open world implemented works well. Our heroes spend a fair amount of time outside the city and in the wastelands, which represent a big



portion of vehicle missions. Jak 3's open world and enhancement make it feel heavily inspired by *GTA*, but it remains true to Naughty Dog's original. That's thanks to Naughty Dog still working its magic on this title.

Fans of the series should definitely buy it, and anyone looking for an entertaining and funny game with a rich world should also give it a try. But it does have a much darker edge to it than seen in previous games in the series and is definitely not as light-hearted. **NAG**



COMBAT FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2: PACIFIC THEATER

DEVELOPER: Microsoft
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234-2680
GENRE: Flight Sim
PLATFORM: PC
RRP: R99

COMBAT FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2 has been one of the best in the series, matching even the critically acclaimed *Century of Flight*. Moving the action from Europe to the Pacific, the game also brought flight simulators forward a big step. It used a full 3D cockpit and aimed for deep realism with an accurate weather system and a lot of detail in flying the six vintage airplanes taken from the US and Japanese forces. But at the same time it can be scaled down to give a more arcade experience, so that

people can enjoy the combat aspect. There are several flight modes to experience the various aspects of the planes, including one for just straight flying. A 3D all-round view helps in combat situations. It's definitely one of the best combat flight games ever released.

The problem is that it's over five years old and predates the incredible *I/2 Sturm*ovik. No current system will have any problems running it, plus better games have since arrived in the genre. It's still a solid game, though, so if the old visuals and slightly rigid game dynamic won't be a problem, it's still fun playing. It might make for a good gift if someone's PC isn't up to scratch anymore. **NAG**



1. Brothers in Arms



2. The Bard's Tale



3. Prince of Persia
Warrior Within



4. The Settlers: Heritage
of Kings



5. Silent Hunter III



6. CSI Crime Scene
Investigation



7. Chessmaster 10th
Edition



8. Microsoft Flight
Simulator 2002



9. Age of Empires
Gold Edition



10. Far Cry



11. Playboy The Mansion
Gold Edition



12. Heroes of Might and
Magic IV Complete



13. Zoo Tycoon



14. CSI: Miami



15. CSI: Dark Motives



16. Combat Flight
Simulator 2



17. Microsoft Train
Simulator



18. Scrabble 2005 Edition



19. Myst IV
Revelation



20. Rainbow Six 3: Raven
Shield Gold Edition

October 2005

November 2005

December 2005

January 2006



SA Computer MAGAZINE



Hardware Reviews: Acer Ferrari F-19 LCD and the Sandisk Cruzer Titanium 1GB



Group Test: A comparative look at the products in our test lab. This month we look at bluetooth cellphone headsets



Feature: The Opera browser is making a vigilant comeback



Demystified: The what, how and why of power supplies

February 2006



March 2006



April 2006



May 2006



Software: CorelDraw X3 and SuSE Linux Enterprise Desktop



Free Supplement: 24 pages of the latest technology and products on display at CeBIT



Versus: Who will win the next optical disc race: Blu-ray or HD-DVD?



Hands on How To: Opera 9 explained

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HARDWARE

HARDWARE INDEX

REVIEWS

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H@RDCOR3 ROUNDUP

100 G71 and G73 hit SA!

NVIDIA has taken on the X1900XTX with a vengeance, although from the spec sheet, not with a lot of innovation. That said, the company has filled the channel with new offerings covering every price point, so we got the lot in for our Hardcor3 roundup to get the real facts on how the 90nm manufacturing process drives. The game's on!



UNITY MAY BE STRENGTH, BUT DIVERSITY EQUALS INNOVATION

FOCUSING FOR TOO LONG, AND IN TOO MUCH DETAIL, ON A SINGLE AREA IS LIKE BREEDING FROM THE SAME GENE POOL. IT FOSTERS WEAKNESS AND POTENTIALLY HIDEOUS MUTATION

WHEN YOU'VE BEEN INVOLVED in the IT game for as long as we have, you start to think that perhaps you've seen it all. Sure, hardware gets faster, graphics get more detailed and more stunning, and drives get bigger every month. Yet all of these advances become, well, mere reiterations of the advances that were made five years ago, rather than the pure-blooded innovation which we expect of our fast-paced high-profile industry.

And although, to a certain extent, this lack of innovation is something of a by-product of how quickly things change in our high-end, high-powered 'Gaming IT' sector, in our case the jaded cynicism is also partially a backlash effect from the fact that we have been focused on IT, and IT hardware in particular, in such minute detail from countless in-depth examinations for almost a decade at this point.

A NEVER-DEVIATING FOCUS IS A SURE WAY OF CAUSING A COMPLETE LOSS OF INTEREST....

It struck us recently that although unswerving dedication to a subject, or area, or anything really, is just about the only way to become a recognised expert, a guru if you will, there's a lot to be said for diversity as well – by which we mean diversifying your interests as a means of reigniting the passion which quite naturally erodes as time passes.

A lot can be said of either approach, but in our opinion a never-deviating focus, even if it's an all-consuming passion when it begins, is a sure way of one day, somewhere down the line, a complete loss of interest in the subject. After all, any action has an equal and opposite reaction according to that clever chap Newton, so surely this law can be applied to emotional as well as physical states?

In fact, before you all accuse us of getting too touchy-feely in our frag-filled techno-fest of a publication; the same theory can be applied to hardware, and hardware manufacturers. Although the really big boys, like Intel (just as an example), lead their fields globally through consistent delivery of a product which is similar to the old product, only better, it is

through diversity that they are able to make the leaps needed to stand head and shoulders above the crowd.

The real trick here is that problem-solving is more of an intuitive process than a structured one. Although it may seem a step-by-step science, leaps of logic or gut feelings are often the actions which will ultimately solve the problem presented. Sure, a lot of the process of elimination is just that, a process, which if properly adhered to can eliminate problems by itself, and a lot more is pure experience, but that gut instinct cannot be replaced, particularly if it's not a well-known and documented issue which we come across quite regularly in our bleeding-edge profession.

So then, by diversifying your interests you can not only rejuvenate a feeling made stale by years of singular practice, you also need experiences that vary from your particular

'norm' because you could well just stumble across an approach or angle needed to overcome those particularly sticky barriers to further development.

We know it's difficult to take time out from your hectic schedule of gaming and everyday life to squeeze in a whole new activity, but believe us it's really worth it. You not only gain a whole new area of conversation, you become involved with an entirely new community of people to share your valuable thoughts with! You learn things that you never did before, and rejuvenate your capacity for learning as a whole by refreshing your interest in even those things that had become mundane.

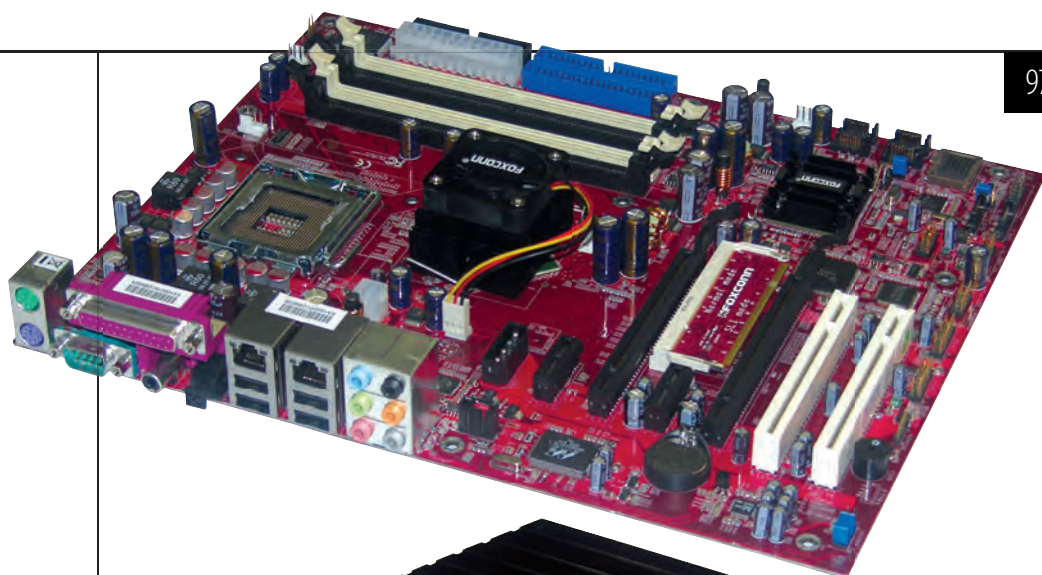
Meanwhile, so that your existing passion for gaming and gaming-related hardware can continue unabated, here's a selection of some of the finest crave-worthy kit we've been toying with and learning about in the NAG office this month. This is still our core focus, and thanks to active diversification, our lasting passion, which we share with you, our committed readers!

Russell Bennett

AWARDS

THE NAG HARDWARE AWARD is reserved for those products that really blow us away, whether by virtue of sheer grunt, value for money, or pure unspecified sexiness. This award will only be bestowed upon products that really stand out, even to our somewhat jaded and cynical eyes, and should be considered among the primary choices when purchasing products in the respective categories. Products which receive this accolade are beyond doubt rather special. So watch out for them and take note!





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OUR HARDWARE APPROACH

AT NAG, WE HAVE a very malleable approach to testing the latest hardware for you, and we define the test procedures on a more or less product by product basis. Due to the wide range of hardware we are asked to review, a single policy cannot be laid out and strictly adhered to.

In addition, the number of products that arrives at our office every month is so vast that it's only a prime selection that even reaches these printed pages you read. We also try to include the hardware which PC enthusiasts would like to find out more about.

Therefore, at NAG our review process, although rooted in a technical background and based on solid benchmark data, is largely objective and as such, is our objective opinion of the samples we receive. And we've been exposed to so much technology in our collective years in this vocation that these opinions are, we like to believe, among the most educated in the country.

So we run all the requisite benchmarks, like FutureMark's synthetic 3DMark series, the latest system-heavy gaming titles (*F.E.A.R.* and *X³: Reunion* are two that spring to mind right off the bat), and more specialised benchmarking suites like Everest (specifically for RAM performance) and SiSoft Sandra 2005, which is very good at measuring CPU performance.

What's most important to us is that we get a detailed impression of the reality of using the equipment being reviewed. While that impression naturally includes 'The Numbers' from the various benches, these don't always reflect the absolute, final verdict. It's possible that we, from time-to-time, prefer a package which may not score the highest during testing, and where that is the reality, we'll explain our rationale.

After all, our goal is to provide you, the reader, with the most accurate information about how satisfied you will be with your purchase.

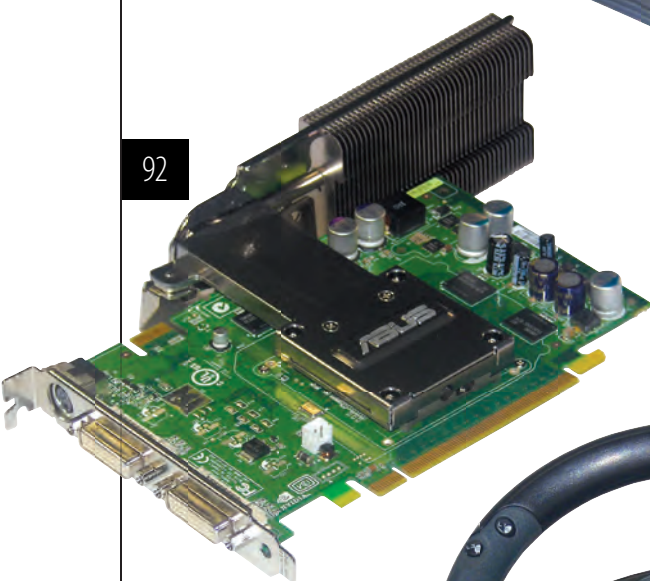
So enjoy reading about the latest and greatest hardware in the pages to follow, which we have slaved over so that you can make the most educated choice possible in your next hardware purchase.

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92



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HARDWARE

ASUS EN7600GT SILENT



DUE TO THE RESOUNDING success of the 6600 GT, NVIDIA had their work cut out for them as far as producing a worthy successor to arguably the best mid-range part to ever exist. With the 7600 GT it appears that NVIDIA has succeeded in replacing the 6600 GT with a faster graphics cards while keeping costs the same or lower.

When we received the Asus EN7600GT Silent cards, what immediately caught our attention was the large packaging. The box is mostly covered by King Kong's face, which is fitting since the game is bundled with the card and is bound to be a great pulling card for those in the market for an upgrade. Inside the packaging there is a leather CD wallet, four CDs, one TV-out cable, a high quality full colour manual and the card itself.

The graphics cards are exact NVIDIA reference design cards, with only the heatsink changed from an active fan to a completely silent heatpipe solution. The cooling system is pretty impressive in that the heatsink is adjustable a full 90 degrees from lying horizontally to fully extended, forming a right angle with the graphics card. We weren't sure how this affected cooling, but it did make it possible to install two of these graphics cards in SLI on the space-starved DFI SLI-D motherboard.

Buying a graphics card with many CDs inside the packaging always gets one excited, even though more often than not there's nothing useful on the CDs. The EN7600GT cards featured two of these CDs. The driver disk didn't have the relevant drivers for the graphics cards in question, and the second CD was a

repetition of the generic manual which had probably been packaged with every graphics card since the GeForce FX. That, however, was offset by the inclusion of *Xpand Rally*, which, while not featuring any licensed vehicles, is fun in small doses.

The 7600 GT is very similar to the 6600 GT and for the most part is a refined 6600 GPU. Had the 7600 GT been configured exactly the same way as the 6600 GT, it would have been very hard for NVIDIA to impress upon its board partners why they should be buying these chipsets over the proven 6600. NVIDIA, however, did a few nifty things and for the most part outfitted the 7600 with the exact same configuration as the 6800. The brilliance is in how much cheaper it is to manufacture the 7600 over the 6800. So in essence, with the 7600 you get the speed of the 6800 at the price of the 6600 - a great product for NVIDIA, AIBs, retailers and customers. Since most board partners are still manufacturing the 6600 cards, the 7600 is even more attractive as it uses the exact same PCB as the 6600, right down to the markings which indicate that these boards were destined for an eternal relationship with the NV43 GPU.

However, clock-for-clock the 7600 GT is more efficient and hence quicker than the NV43 it replaces. In fact, floating point math operations have more than doubled according to NVIDIA.

The NV43 featured a fragment design similar to that of the 6800 cards. That is, two Logic Units (ALU) sharing one texture unit, but only one (primary ALU) having texture sampling abilities. This was obviously a successful design, but had its limitations and created a number of stalls for the second ALU. In short, the second ALU could only do some math operations, but most of them were reliant on the result generated by the primary ALU.

With the G73, the fragment units each contain two identical

VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Performance
- OdB noise levels
- Keen pricing

■ Cons

Poor F.E.A.R. results

■ Supplier

Axiz [011] 237-7000/Frontosa [011] 466-0038

■ Internet

www.axiz.co.za/www.frontosa.co.za

■ RRP

R2,456

■ Reviewer

Neo Sibeseki

SPECS

■ Graphics Processor

NVG73, 560MHz, 90nm

■ Pipeline

8 ROPS/ 12 Textures/12 Fragment shaders/ 5 Vertex units

■ Memory

256MB, Samsung GDDR3 1.4ns, 700MHz

■ Bandwidth

22.4GB/s

■ PCI-E

16x

■ Compatibility

DirectX 9.0c, OpenGL 2.0

■ Connections

TV-Out (HDTV-Component, Composite)

■ Bundle

Asus CD-Wallet, Peter Jackson's King Kong, Xpand Rally.



Silent cooler now swivels through 90° to allow SLI installation

ALUs, both capable of texture sampling. Even though only one can access the texture sampler at a time, this does allow access to read-only registers on the second ALU. Both ALUs are now MADD (MAD+ADD) instead of the second having MUL and ADD abilities only.

So with these improvements, one could argue that the GPU has twice the number of 'pixel shaders' as it does full fragment units. That is, the G73, despite having 12 fragment shaders, has '24 pixel shaders' and the G71 (7900 series) has 48 pixel shaders. Raster outputs have also increased over those of the 6600. The 7600 features eight render outputs compared to the four on the 6600. Even if the core clock has only increased by 60MHz, the overall fill-rate has increased tremendously, especially single texturing which has more than doubled from 2GB/s to 4.4GB/s. Since the NV43 was originally a 90nm part back in 2004, the power consumption and heat generation has not improved much over the 6600, which is not a major issue as the 6600 never suffered from heat issues.

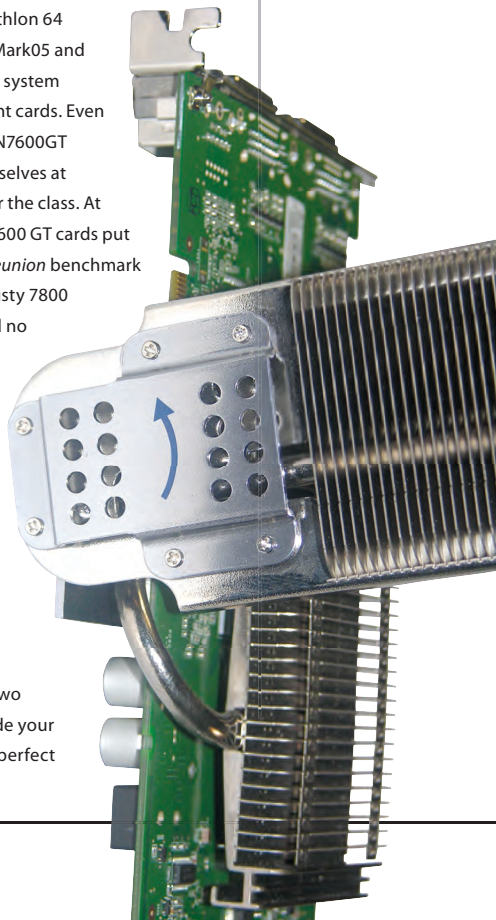
On the memory management side NVIDIA has, with the G73, kept the '2 x 64-bit' memory crossbar as it has proven efficient enough over the years to not need a complete redesign. Also, when dealing with the relatively low data-rate offered by the bit width of mid-range cards of today, any tweaking would yield very little performance gain.

Like all 7600 GT's out right now, the Asus cards sport Samsung GC14 1.4ns RAM chips. These are the same modules on the bigger GeForce 7900 GT, so they have great overclocking potential. Be that as it may, however, the samples received didn't overclock at all. Yes the RAM did overclock to 906MHz (1,812MHz effective) on each card, which was mighty impressive, but more of a good showing on Samsung's part rather than Asus'. The core refused to overclock past 563MHz which meant that overclocking the RAM past the reference speed would have yielded very little in terms of improvement, and as such no overclocking was done on the cards.

We installed the Asus cards in SLI configuration in our test system, powered by an Athlon 64 X2 4600+ processor. 3DMark03, 3DMark05 and 3DMark06 all fell to the might of the system paired with the Asus EN7600GT Silent cards. Even in the very old 3DMark2001SE the EN7600GT Silent cards managed to place themselves at number two in the world ranking for the class. At more modest system settings, the 7600 GT cards put out impressive numbers in the X³: Reunion benchmark and 3DMark06. Compared to our trusty 7800 GT, the Asus 7600GT combo showed no mercy, beating the single card by more than a thousand points in 3DMark06, scoring 5,870 points.

Where the cards didn't do so well was in F.E.A.R. at 1,600 x 1,200 with 4x AA. The 7600 GT combo managed only 2fps more than the 7800 GT despite the 6.8GB/sec advantage in data-rate.

In general, we liked the Asus 7600GT Silent cards. They were fast, silent, easy to set up and included two recent games. If you want to upgrade your 6600 GT or 6800 LE, this will be the perfect upgrade. **NAG**



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LUXON

USB&SATA
3.5" EXT. HDD ENCLOSURE



VIZO LUXON

Compatible with **3.5" IDE or SATA** Hard Drive
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Aluminum Casing cools down your Hard Drive
Mirror finish & rich 3 colors available
LED Indicator / Support Hot-Swap
SATA Bracket included
(convert onboard SATA to External SATA)



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ANTEC P180

THE P180 IS AN absolute fairytale of the 'less is more' design philosophy, from the outside at least. Resplendent in its matte-black finish, which is new for this offering by the way (the P180 was previously only available in silver), this chassis presents the user with a delightfully fuss-free face. And yet, Antec has shaped the full-frontal face neatly to incorporate front-mounted USB, FireWire and audio ports while the door remains closed. One criticism here: Antec could easily have made the power button accessible with the door closed as well. That said, leaving the face open doesn't ruin the pleasing look, as the door folds away through 270 degrees to lie flush with the side panel when fully opened.

Cooling, clearly, was on the forefront of the designer's brief as well, with the P180 coming standard fitted with three 120mm case fans. One vents air out the conventional rear-facing port just above the I/O panel, a second expels hot air out the top of the case where the PSU normally resides, and a third is positioned between the primary HDD drive cage and PSU.

The PSU is positioned below the motherboard, which at first we thought might be a problem should your PSU sport particularly

short power cables. They would have to be particularly short, however, as every PSU we tried had plenty of cable to reach the important power connectors on the motherboard or on a CD-ROM drive positioned right at the top of the 5¼-inch drive rack.

Working inside the P180 is a treat. The repositioning of the PSU has liberated quite a lot of space around the CPU socket which is useful, and thoughtful touches like the pull-rings incorporated into the removable drive cages make you feel warm and fuzzy all over. Even the sharp edges have been rounded off and smoothed over, leaving very few finger-threatening sharp edges to injure the poor techie.

Those three fans each include a small three-step speed adjustment switch, which can be a bit tricky to locate easily, but you don't really need to fiddle with the speed much as at medium

the system remained commendably quiet. And if the three 120mm fans, already installed, prove to not be sufficient to cool your PC, there's one more 120mm mounting bracket in front of the second 3½-inch drive cage.

The P180 then, whether in the new matte-black or the older silver finish, is a winner in pretty much every respect. It's sleek and stylish from the outside, thoughtful and technician-friendly on the inside, and is capable of keeping even the most extreme gaming system cool. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Superb build quality
- Great looks inside and out
- Top-notch cooling capabilities
- R100 cheaper than the older silver P180

■ Cons

None

■ Supplier

Frontosa [011] 466-0038

■ Internet

www.frontosa.co.za

■ RRP

R1,589

■ Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ Dimensions

54cm x 20.5cm x 50.7cm (H x W x D)

■ Weight

14.1kg

■ Material

Cold rolled steel, 0.8mm and 1.0mm

■ Front ports

2 x USB 2.0, 1 x FireWire, audio out and microphone

■ Front door

Double hinge, swivels through 270 degrees

■ Motherboard

Standard ATX

■ Expansion bays (External)

4 x 5¼-inch, 1 x 3½-inch

■ Expansion bays (Internal)

6 x 3½-inch HDD

■ Cooling

One rear 120mm TriCool fan, one top, and one lower chamber; Also one optional 120mm housing (front)

■ Special features

Bottom-mounted PSU pull-tabs for HDD cages



Where the PSU normally sits, is now the I/O panel and one large system fan. The PSU sits right at the bottom





THERMALTAKE HARDCANO 14

HARD DRIVE COOLERS HAVE become increasingly necessary as hard drives increase in capacity and speed. Today's average 7,200rpm drive produces enough heat to rival a graphics card of a few years back, and that means hard drives should have enough airflow around them if all is to remain operational.

The Thermaltake Hardcano 14 is one such cooler. It's able to accommodate all 3½-inch hard drives (IDE, SCSI and SATA), and is ideal for those looking to safeguard their data and prolong the life of their hard drives.

The Hardcano 14, as with most coolers of this type, uses a large aluminium casing that will house your hard drive, and is equipped with a small built-in fan that will assist in keeping things cool. The unit's front side has a honeycomb mesh that covers a blue glow when the unit is powered, serving as an indicator of a functioning fan. The Hardcano 14 uses a clamshell design that makes it easy to access the drive that would be housed inside. The drive is held securely by screws and surprisingly enough, there is very little vibration noise if any at all.

Monitoring the drive temperature did show a decrease in temperature, but only by 4°C (from 43°C to 39°C) when using the Hardcano 14. With that said, it is worth bearing in mind that when you have important information on your hard drive, this small investment will more than justify all the hassles it could potentially save you from in the long run. In the simplest terms, you'd rather have the Hardcano 14 than wish you had when your hard drive is damaged due to excessive heat.

The Thermaltake Hardcano 14 comes highly recommended for media centre PCs that have drives which work several hours a day. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros

- Easy-access clamshell
- Little noise output

Cons

None

Supplier

Corex [011] 707-5000

Internet

www.corex.co.za

RRP

R410

Reviewer

Neo Sibeko

SPECS

Weight

986g

Dimensions

210mm x 150mm x 44mm (L x W x H)

Material

Aluminium

Fan size

50mm x 50mm x 10mm

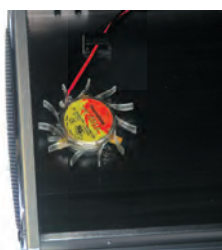
Rated voltage

12V

Bearing type

Sleeve

Only a small temperature drop, but then this IS only a small fan



COMPRO
TECHNOLOGY

Digital Satellite TV Tuner & Capture Card

with Power Up Technology

VideMate s350



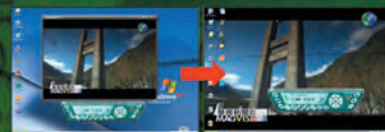
DVB-S TV Watching and Recording

VideMate S350 provides SDTV and up to 1080i HDTV digital TV watching, DiSEqC 1.2, Transport Stream and MPEG-2 digital TV recording to get the best DVB-S TV experience.

Advanced PIP/POP* Feature for 4 channels watching



Video Desktop for more convenience



Remote Control Power On/Off
Power Up Scheduled Recording
Hardware Timeshifting
Picture Purifying Technology



*PIP/POP - Picture in/out Picture



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THERMALTAKE PUREPOWER TWV 500

THERMALTAKE ISN'T NEW TO gamers and PC enthusiasts. With a number of successful products from water-cooling solutions to cases, Thermaltake covers almost every single component that has to do with personal computing.

When confronted with the PurePower TWV 500, we had no idea what to expect, but judging by the weight alone we were already sold on the build quality of the PSU. The contents of the package were the most impressive we had ever seen from any PSU. Inside one finds a TWV (Total Watts Viewer) panel which, while not necessary, is nice to have if only to see the load your components are placing on your power supply. Also included is a 120mm fan which can either be thermally controlled by the PSU or adjusted manually by the TWV panel (which has two fan controller knobs). The PSU itself features a blue LED-equipped 120mm fan on its underside which exhausts hot air through the honeycomb mesh at the rear. The fan's rotation is dependent on the power drawn from the unit. The higher the load, the faster it spins.

The unit features an embedded socket and modularised cable system which allows you to only plug in the power connectors you need. This will be greatly appreciated by those who find it hard to tidy up their cases and since the cables themselves are sleeved, airflow is bound to improve and that's always appreciated.

Two PCI-E 6-pin connectors mean this unit is SLI and CrossFire ready. Five 4-pin SATA connectors, an impressive nine 4-pin Molex power connectors and two floppy drive connectors round off the package.

Installing the unit was painless and quick. The cable management system is easy to understand and within ten minutes of opening the package, the Thermaltake PurePower was operational. Upon powering the system up, the TWV measured a load of 98W, which increased to 110W while loading Windows

and settled at 150W when idling. At this point the 120mm fan was almost inaudible and all seemed to be well. This was not the case when 3DMark06 was running and the load increased to 368W, at which point the fan revved up to intolerable levels of noise at 2,800rpm. The low noise design was clearly not working when it needed to. Exiting the benchmark dropped the load by a substantial amount, but the fan rotation didn't seem to change until the PC was restarted.

To test the advantage of dual 12V rails, two 7600 GT cards were installed in SLI, and 3DMark06 was loaded again. The 120mm fan, as before, increased its rotation speed to uncomfortable levels, but that was not the most concerning issue. During the CPU test, the machine restarted even though the load was below 400W according to the TWV. A second attempt fared no better. Considering that the 7600 GT cards didn't need to be powered by the PCI-E connectors at all and relied on the 75W delivered by the bus itself, the dual 18A 12V rails were counterproductive. Inspecting the 12V rail in the BIOS showed it to be quite low at 11.87V, which didn't inspire confidence at all - and the same could be said about the 3.3V and 5V rails.

So with all the high quality finishes and great packaged accessories, the power supply failed to do anything with efficiency. Granted, the testing system was overclocked, but it was still not a great showing by the unit at all. Our old PSU with a single 12V rail of 28A was able to handle the load without dipping under the 12V mark. And it was less than half the price of the Thermaltake unit.

If you have a system that's not overclocked and are in need of a power supply, this could just be what you need. However, should you be thinking of a CrossFire or an SLI configuration, we wouldn't recommend this PSU under any circumstances. When it fails, it will likely send your graphics cards, motherboard and/or CPU to hardware heaven along with itself. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Modular cable management
- Lots of connectors

■ Cons

- Noisy under load conditions
- Potentially unreliable power

■ Supplier

Corex [011] 707-5000

■ Internet

www.corex.co.za

■ RRP

R1,345

■ Reviewer

Neo Sibeko

SPECS

■ Cabling

Modularised cable management

■ Specification

ATX 12V 2.0 PSU

■ Connections

- Dual PCI-E, 4 x SATA, 9 x 4-pin Molex
- Active PFC (Power Factor Correction)
- 5¼-inch Total Watts Viewer (TWV) module
- Fan speed controller via TWV panel

■ Protection circuits

Over voltage, Short circuit, Over current, Overload and Over temperature

■ Rated Output

500W

At 2,800 RPM, this fan makes a ton of noise!



FOXCONN NF4SLI7AA

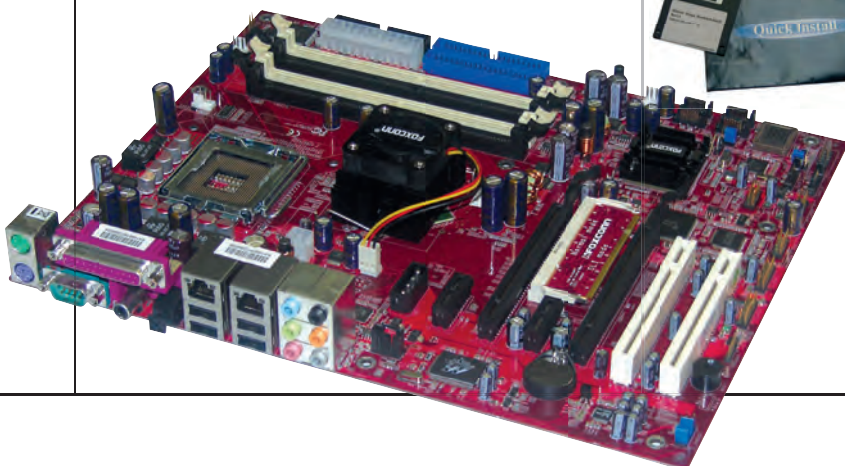
FOXCONN MAY NOT BE the first name on the lips of gamers who know their motherboards. The brand may not be as well-known as others, but Foxconn is actually the trading name of Hon Hai Precision Industry Co (Ltd), which is the largest private company in Taiwan with revenues of over \$400 billion. Foxconn manufactures Intel-branded motherboards for Intel, the Mac mini (for Apple), and boards for many other manufacturers such as Dell.

The NF4SLI7AA is a Pentium 4 board based on the nForce4 SLI Intel edition chipset. At first glance it seems like a fairly average SLI motherboard. It's bright red with two PCI Express x16 slots, two PCI-E x1 slots, two PCI, and four DDR2 slots. Hard drive connectors include two PATA and six SATA, two of which are on a Silicon Image controller. The back panel is fairly unremarkable as well: four USB 2.0 ports, two Gigabit Ethernet ports, and a full set of audio out, including optical and coaxial digital ports. There are headers for another six USB ports on the board.

The differences that make the board stand out start with what's included in the box. Foxconn earns our gratitude for providing both the nForce and Silicon Image SATA drivers on individual floppy disks, so that you don't need to copy them off the CD on another PC for a new install, something other manufacturers seem to often leave out for the sake of saving the miniscule cost of a floppy or two. Foxconn also included two high-quality rounded IDE cables and a rounded floppy cable, two SATA cables and two SATA power splitters. Slot covers are a 2-port USB, an 8-pin FireWire 800 port, and a bracket for oversized dual graphics cards. There's also a huge poster detailing installation, with a great high-resolution colour image of the board so you can find everything.

The BIOS was also quite well done. There are various 'super' options such as SuperBoot, SuperBIOS-Protect, SuperRecovery Hotkey and SuperSpeed. SuperSpeed is where the overclocking options are. The settings are quite straightforward and we had no problem overclocking a CPU on this board. It didn't achieve any record-breaking FSB speeds, but for people more inclined on spending money on their graphics card than their cooling, it should prove more than adequate.

Overall, the NF4SLI7AA is a solid board with good packaging. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

Pros

- Affordable SLI board
- High-quality accessories included

Cons

- Won't set overclocking records
- Out-of-date rear port layout

Supplier

Pinnacle Micro [011] 265-3000

Internet

www.pinnacle.co.za

RRP

R1100

Reviewer

Toby Hudon

SPECS

Platform

Intel Pentium 4 LGA775 Socket

FSB

800/1,067

Memory bus

Dual channel DDR2 667

Slots

2 x PCI-E x16, 2 x PCI-E x1, 2 x PCI

Ports

- USB 2.0 (4+6)
- IEEE 1394b
- SPDIF, dual Ethernet
- parallel,
- serial
- 2 x ATA133
- 6 x SATA

Ethernet

Dual Gigabit Ethernet

Audio

Realtek 7.1-inch HD Audiot

Considering the budget price of this SLI is offering, it features a very generous bundle!



ViPower

Uni Skyper



Palm Size USB Phone



Model: VPEUP-03



VoIP on Your Existing Phone Skype Phone Adapter

Your home phone will become Skype phone!!



Model: VPET-20



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THRUSTMASTER FERRARI 2-IN-1 RUMBLE FORCE

WE WERE ALL VERY excited when the news of Thrustmaster being officially represented by a local distributor hit our inboxes a few months back. So when the Thrustmaster Ferrari 2-in-1 Rumble Force arrived at the office, it didn't hang around in it's box for very long as we were keen to get to grips with it and see if reality could live up to the hype.

As we are rapidly coming to expect of Thrustmaster offerings, the 2-in-1 immediately made a positive impression through sheer, tangible build quality. The wheel, its housing, and even the pedals with their metal stalks all just screamed durability. And the tactile pleasures nestled behind the wheel, in the form of the two reinforced metal gearshift levers, are perfectly formed and click satisfyingly whenever you go for a gear change. Even the 'bungee cord' passive feedback system, which gives the wheel more turn resistance as you add lock – like a real car – felt absolutely brilliant.

However, be cautious what you are purchasing! If you're looking for a Force Feedback wheel, well, this isn't it. Thrustmaster manufactures an identical Ferrari 2-in-1 Force Feedback wheel if that's what you need. This, however, is the Rumble Force version.

It's a worrying side-effect of Thrustmaster's multi-platform approach. The Ferrari is called a 2-in-1 as it works on both PS2 and PC platforms. The Rumble Force effect is pure PS2, amounting to no more than a dual-shock-like vibration when you run over a pavement, or smash your virtual racer into a wall.

In our eagerness to get playing with the wheel, we had not paid heed to the Rumble Force branding, and were therefore expecting a regular force feedback sensation, so the vibrating Rumble Force surprised and infuriated us!

That said however, if your intention in buying a wheel isn't to get the most realistic sensations from the latest hardcore driving

simulator on the market, but simply to add some 'feel' to your stock of arcade racers, the Thrustmaster Ferrari 2-in-1 is a superb product.

The single-clamp mounting system is excellent, gripping your mounting surface tightly and feeling robust enough overall. The multitude of buttons, including D-pad, all feel great under your fingertips, and the gear change paddles are truly a cut above any competition in this segment. And then there's that lovely prancing horse badge on the steering wheel boss, which, if you're a fan of these high-performance super cars (and really, who isn't?), shoots the feel-good factor right through the roof.

Then there's also the fact that you can use the same unit for driving games on both PS2 and PC.

Although, initially, we felt severely let-down by the lack of real force feedback, after a few days with the unit we were able to recognise it for what it is. This is an excellent offering. It's merely an additional option for the consumer to choose from when purchasing a wheel. Not all of our tastes are the same after all, and for some the vibration effect will no doubt actually be preferable over the more realistic forces. Just be careful when ordering, because if you do crave realistic-feeling forces, you'll be extremely disappointed by this Rumble Force wheel. Specify the Force Feedback variant of the Ferrari 2-in-1, if that's what you want! **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Quality feel
- Dual platform

■ Cons

- Only rumble force

■ Supplier

Bowline [021] 550-9700

■ Internet

www.bowline.co.za

■ RRP

R765

■ Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ Features

- Interface: USB (PC), game port plug (PS2)
- Feedback type: Vibration Force
- 'Force button' on wheel activates, deactivates effect
- Precision Drive technology – amplifies accuracy of wheel control on PS2
- Ergonomic design with rubber for improved grip
- Bungee cord mechanism for realistic sensations
- Central clamping system
- Total 12 programmable buttons and D-pad on wheel itself
- Long-travel pedals for precision



Connectors for both PC and PS2, class-leading build quality



PHILIPS SHG8050

IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH imagination to figure out just how these headphones came to be. Somewhere an executive was playing with a vibrating PlayStation 2 or Xbox controller and thought "Hey, let's make headphones that do this 'vrrrrrb' thing."

Out pops the unimaginatively titled Philips SHG8050, or 'For Gaming' headset. The immediate shape of the headphones is unique, to say the least. They look uncomfortable but actually sit well on the head. The headphones can fold up for storage (in the provided carry baggy), great for gamers on the go.

The cable from the headphones isn't very long, but a supplied extender helps with that. The headphones have a volume spinner behind the right headphone, and a 'Vibration Level' selector switch on the front of the right headphone. This switch can be either Off, Level 1 or Level 2.

The sound quality is good in low to mid ranges, though the high-range could do with better treble. The extender cable is a wonderful addition, and the carry bag useful. A left-right splitter is also included for plugging the headphones straight into a console or hi-fi system – another welcome addition.

You can stop there and have a wonderful headset, moderately priced and of high quality.

Now let's look at that Vibration Level function.

The first and only real technical problem here is that the Vibration Level switch forces you to choose between some vibration, or no sound at all. You cannot use the headphones with Vibration Off, because then the sound is also off. A bit of an oversight, as while the vibration does add another layer of pleasant tactile feedback, sometimes you just want it off. If you can forgive that, then you won't be much perturbed.

The vibration itself seesaws between gimmick and innovation. With the right piece of music or the right scene in a game, the vibration really knocks your socks off (on Level II, quite literally). It's one thing to have thumping bass, but it is an entirely different experience when said thumping is the result of the headphones making a tactical vibrate and not just jiggling wind in your ear.

If left on all the time however, the vibration eventually becomes slightly uncomfortable – that's why being able to switch just the vibration off would have worked so well. Instead, the constant vibration (if you listen to bass-heavy items) will cause your eardrums to itch.

For the more technical-minded, the 'For Gaming' headphones have a frequency range of 15-20Hz, 100dB sensitivity and 24Ω impedance.

Due to the headphone vibrating, it takes one AAA battery to make it go – thankfully it doesn't go through batteries very fast. A trick, if you have the time to do this every time, is to remove the battery when you don't want vibration and put one in when you do. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

Pros

- Good sound quality
- Vibration is tactile

Cons

- Too much vibration hurts
- Can't switch vibration off independently of sound

Supplier

Philips [011] 471 5000

Internet

www.philips.co.za

RRP

R399

Reviewer

Miktar Dracon

SPECS

Sensitivity

100db

Frequency

15 - 20Hz

Impedance

24Ωm

Features

1 x AAA

Extras

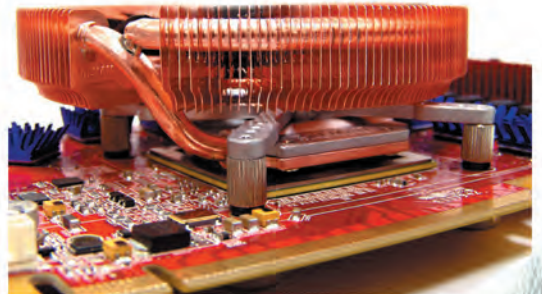
- Volume wheel on right side
- Collapsible portability

Uniquely shaped "for gaming" headphones are more comfortable than they appear

ZALMAN

DUAL ULTRA QUIET
heatpipe
VGA COOLER

VF900-CU



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NVIDIA'S LATEST GPU RANGE GETS HARDCOR3!

Nvidia has released its new big hitter with the 7900 GTX. It's also refreshed its entire lineup with GPUs using a 90nm manufacturing process which it claims will be more efficient, cheaper, and more powerful. Well, here's where we find out!

SOWITH FAR MORE measured, even-handed timing than its Canadian counterpart, NVIDIA has launched its latest range of GPUs to reclaim its throne as the graphics-chipset world leader in the form of the 7900 GTX, 7900 GT and 7600 GT offerings hitting the market as we type.

It's interesting to note that NVIDIA appears to be very careful to avoid the negative 'paper launch' scenario. Every major NVIDIA board manufacturer has at least some form of the new GPU available.

That said, rumours have started popping up on the Web, with people claiming that the initial glut has been rapidly snapped up, leaving many big-name suppliers entirely out of stock of the new graphics cards. Could there be a flaw in the release schedule despite the solid off-the-mark availability? Only time will tell....

Fortunately, what we can answer right now is just how well these new NVIDIA offerings actually perform in the real world. To do this properly, we've gathered a broad cross-section of offerings, all based on the latest 90nm NVIDIA technology, for a shootout on our NAG test bench. We ran all the cards, one by one, on a Pentium 670-based system with 2GB of DDR2 running at 533MHz and an ABIT AW8 motherboard for the platform.

Since the boards ranged from the high-end 7900 GTX offerings, seemingly the most widely available at this point, down to the 7600 GS, we have separated this roundup into three sections representing the high, mid and low-end of the 90nm options. Most of the focus here is on the high-end parts, even though at first glance all appear pretty much identical.

We came up with some interesting results overall, so read on to find out all about what the move to a 90nm manufacturing process has done for NVIDIA.

7900 GTX

RIGHT, THIS IS THE GPU that's making waves at the moment. This G71 is the card which has toppled the mighty X1900XTX from its lofty perch as the standalone champion GPU. And as the numbering suggests, this is the pinnacle of the GeForce 7-series architecture.

Perhaps in an effort to keep costs down, and perhaps in order to ensure an adequate supply of solutions, every single 7900 GTX we were sent featured the identical two-slot, quad-heatpipe HSF design familiar to owners of 7800 512MB cards. Fortunately, there's nothing wrong with this cooler at all. It's highly efficient at keeping your expensive graphics hardware chilled, and doesn't ever generate annoying levels of noise either, although we're sure the 'improved efficiencies' which NVIDIA claims its new 90nm process delivers has something to do with the former at least.

What's interesting is that it seems NVIDIA, and its manufacturing partners, may have gotten a little stung by poor sales of the ridiculously overpriced last-generation 512MB variant, and this time around there is fairly unusual evidence

of cost-savings from all parties. For Ultimate GPU packages, these 7900 GTXs don't exactly spoil the user in terms of software included in the bundle, for the most part. And judging from their covers at least, we were initially expecting little to separate these offerings aside from the odd sparkling bundle.

Fortunately, some 7900 GTXs had a touch more light hidden under those quad-heatpipe bushels than others...

CHAINTECH GEFORCE 7900 GTX

SUPPLIER: SONICINFORMED

PRICE: R5483



THIS CHAINTECH, SUPPLIED BY SonicInformed, was the first to go through our testing procedures. It was also one of only three in our group that even did anything, however minute, to the HSF. In this case, Chaintech stuck a sticker with its own logo on the fan, covering up the NVIDIA sticker featured in this position by other manufacturers.

Included in the package was a collection of truly run-of-the-mill software, such as WinDVD and a weak, 5-in-1 game disc.

Fortunately, the GPU powering these 7900 GTXs doesn't really need 'extras' to be considered worthwhile. These are powerful graphics cards, have no doubt. The synthetic benchmark figures showed the potential of this Chaintech offering with the card managing 4,694 points in 3DMark06 at 1,600 x 1,200, and 5,352 at the default 1,280 x 1,024 resolution.

Not only are these results miles above the 7800 GTX 256MB we benchmarked for reference, but they're way above scores obtained from recent benches of an X1800 XT TOP, and even beat out the figures we recorded for the Sapphire X1900XTX.

3DMark05 proved at first to be less kind to the G71, managing only 8,800 at 1,024 x 768, with 0x AA and 0x AF. But when we threw higher resolutions and some pixel shading into the mix, the GTX started to make sense, failing to wilt at even the demanding setting of 1,600 x 1200, 4x AA and 16x AF, with a still strong result of 6,452. That's 2,500 points better than the 7800 GTX 256MB at the same setting.

These figures translated well into our gaming tests, with X³ running at over a 57fps average at 1,280 x 1,024, and F.E.A.R. still quite happy with a minimum of 34fps and average of 64fps at 1,280 x 960 with 4x AA and 16x AF turned on.

A good show then by the Chaintech, but in the end the card was relegated to also-ran status thanks to less than average overclocking performance and an extremely run-of-the-mill presentation.

GALAXY 7900 GTX

SUPPLIER: SONICINFORMED

PRICE: R5483



IF ANYTHING, THE GALAXY is even more underwhelming than the Chaintech above. It starts with the bundle, with the manufacturer keeping cost under control by including nothing more than the S-Video cables needed to connect your PC to a TV display, and a driver CD, naturally.

Again, the sheer grunt of the new chipset means that it still can't be called bad value despite this lack, posting excellent figures at its standard clock frequencies of 650MHz for the core and 1.6GHz for the RAM. In fact, by posting 5,905 in 3DMark06 at 1,280 x 1,024, the Galaxy represented the higher-end of the stock 7900 GTX performance spectrum during our tests, which went some way towards making up for the lacklustre bundle.

In 3DMark05, the Galaxy was one of a few 7900s to break the 9,000-point mark in the default benchmark run, albeit by just 58 points. And although an ATI X1900XTX can manage an extra 1,500 at these detail settings, the 7900 simply refused to slow dramatically even when piling on the pressure, unlike the X1900 card.

The marginal lead showed up in the gaming tests. X³ averaged 57.144fps and F.E.A.R. managed a low of 36fps and an average of 67fps at 1,280 x 960 with 4x AA and 16x AF. Still very playable indeed, and marginally ahead of the pack.

However, once more the hidden potential of the big-hitters overshadowed this strong first showing, as the Galaxy couldn't scale to the same heights. If you need a card with superb stock performance, at a decent price, and aren't interested in any extras, the Galaxy 7900 GTX is right up your alley.

GIGABYTE 7900 GTX

SUPPLIER: RECTRON

PRICE: R5699



THE FIRST CARD in our test line-up to feature any kind of software bundle worth mentioning really, the Gigabyte flavour of the 7900 GTX offers the purchaser a free copy of the good, but not great, Serious Sam II. However, the remainder of its performance was very much standard fare.

At 1,280 x 1,024 in 3DMark06, the Gigabyte card scored 5,345, and it held on for 4,694 at 1,600 x 1,200. Similarly average performance results came out in 3DMark05, with 8,807 for the default run, and 7,478 at 1,280 x 1,024 with 4x AA and 16x AF.

F.E.A.R. and X³ results supported the card's absolutely dead-average (for a 7900 GTX) performance. A 56.271fps average in X³ was nothing to shout about, while F.E.A.R. still managed a minimum of 35fps and average of 63fps at 1,280 x 960 with 4x AA and 16x AF.

Otherwise, the Gigabyte failed to shine really. The GPU would overclock, but nowhere near the limits of some of its G71-based cousins, and not enough to really have any impact on its benchmark results at the end of the day. Even its appearance was completely 'reference card'. Once again, you'll no doubt be completely satisfied with the Gigabyte if you purchased one, as the chipset is a stellar performer, but there are better options available if you're interested in doing some digging.

ASUS EN7900 GTX

SUPPLIER: FRONTOSA

PRICE: R5500



THE ASUS WAS ACTUALLY the first 7900 GTX sample to reach our offices, with the remainder following mere weeks behind. Nonetheless, in a close-run contest like this Hardcor3 roundup, promptness has to count for something.

In this case, however, it first seemed that this detail would be meaningless. Asus provides a decent bundle with this high-end offering, including a full version of King Kong and a host of other, less headline-grabbing software additions. Not quite as comprehensive a package as some other Asus enthusiast-targeted products, but decent nonetheless.

The card kicked off to an excellent start by posting some pretty impressive stock results in the synthetic benchmarks. The Asus managed 8,977 in 3DMark05 at default settings, and 7,620 at 1,280 x 1,024 with 4x AA 16x AF. It also came the closest to breaching 6,000 in 3DMark06, with 5,992 at the default detail settings.

When it came to tweaking the GPU with the NVIDIA Coolbits overclocking settings, the EN7900 GTX managed a marvellous 50MHz core and astonishing 200MHz (up to 1.8GHz effective) RAM clock, where it remained stable for a second round of our benchmark runs, with appropriately raised levels of performance in the synthetics in particular.

The real world benchmarks reflected this initial stock performance advantage, but the overclocked rates failed to really show in the real world benches in this case. In fact, F.E.A.R. actually ran slightly slower at these frequencies, which was a bit strange. Nonetheless, an X³ average of 57.098fps and a F.E.A.R. minimum of 36fps and average of 65fps were among the highest, even if at this level the differences were pretty fractional. Put simply, any 7900 GTX will feel great in modern games.

An impressive showing then by the Asus, but still not the winner of the 7900 GTX category.

PIXELVIEW 7900 GTX

SUPPLIER: ESQUIRE

PRICE: R6106



WE KNOW IT'S INCREDIBLY superficial, but we really liked the PixelView packaging this 7900 GTX came wrapped in. The clear plastic outside case, combined with a shadowing effect where the plastic grades from clear through to black against the black backing of the cardboard, makes for a very nice effect.

The PixelView offering also includes two games: the absolutely terrible Project Snowblind, and the fun but old Thief Deadly Shadows. Nice of them to have tried, but these titles are certainly no deal-maker in our opinion.

When it came down to pure performance however, this card was mired squarely in the bog of average which we seemed to be finding ourselves in quite often in this pack. Maybe we've been spoiled, but the 8,787 3DMark05 default run and 5,351 for the standard settings in 3DMark06, are really just okay at this point.

The same went for its real world performances in X³ and F.E.A.R., with the former averaging 57.028fps and the latter 63fps at 1,280 x 960 with 4x AA and 16x AF turned on. What's more, although the PixelView core did overclock to the 700MHz mark, its RAM couldn't surpass 1.7GHz, which again was just perfectly average for a 7900 GTX offering. So let's see what the final two can do to wow us then.

XFX GEFORCE 7900 GTX

SUPPLIER: AXIZ

PRICE: R5399



RIGHT, THE XFX BUNDLE was good. It included the most modern game of all the 7900 GTX cards we got in for testing in Starship Troopers, which is a fun jaunt for a little while and well worth having a free copy of. The packaging even gave us a bit of a laugh, as it states: "Extreme Gaming Experience health warning! People with high blood pressure, back or heart conditions should not use this card; the unmatched graphics quality may be too exhilarating and realistic!"

The card included in the box is pure reference board, even though the 7900 GT from the same manufacturer features some 'extras' more traditionally associated with this enthusiast-orientated manufacturer. In this case, however, the company has stuck to 650MHz/1.6GHz clocks, limiting the appeal of the offering somewhat.

Thanks to this decision, the XFX performed well, but not well enough to really stand out, leaving it purely up to the bundle and natural ability of the G71 GPU to impress the purchaser. It did post scores in the higher regions of our group, however, managing 5,968 in 3DMark06 and 8,979 in 3DMark05. In F.E.A.R. and X³ however, average framerate remained strictly ordinary.

A bit of tweaking had the XFX up to a 702MHz core and 1.7GHz effective RAM, but the tests responded very poorly to the overclock in this case. All the benchmarks we ran yielded slower results than stock at these pumped-up frequencies.

No clear winner as yet then, which leaves it all up to the last card in our line-up...

GAINWARD BLISS 7900 GTX

SUPPLIER: AXIZ

PRICE: R5999



GAINWARD IS WELL-KNOWN FOR its stunning 'Golden Sample' boards, but these can be something of a hit and miss affair with some chipsets. With this first release of the 7900 GTX, the company has not gone with the Golden Sample badging, instead making do with a very discreet 'Special Edition' sticker on the box to indicate that something may be slightly different.

At first you wouldn't really say so. The Gainward is clocked at the standard 650MHz/1.6GHz stock frequencies, and although it is the second company to replace the NVIDIA logo on the fan with a Gainward one, otherwise the HSF remains stock-standard.

Synthetic and real world benches continued the trend. The 5,349 points in 3DMark06 and 8,755 in 3DMark05 were in fact slightly lower than the average, and the same applied to the real world scores, pegging the Bliss fractionally behind the other competitors.

Delve deeper into the Bliss with Coolbits though, and the card comes alive. This monster wouldn't be stopped, with the core finally yielding its highest stable frequency at 718MHz and the RAM almost hitting 1.9GHz effective! And at these settings the Gainward simply wiped the floor with the competition.

It was the only card to crack an average higher than 60fps in our X³ benchmark, and managed a lowest of 39fps with an average of 76fps in F.E.A.R. The synthetic benchmark results were less impressive, yielding scores higher than this card could do at stock frequencies, but still lower than some of the competition. The real world results carried it to the winner's podium.

Also worth mentioning is the fact that Gainward is trying out a new 'free title' distribution model. Rather than a CD or DVD in the box, you receive a coupon for the gainwardgamingzone.com Website, where you can go and select the title you wish to receive. Enter your coupon code, and the disc will be shipped to your doorstep.

7900 GT

SINCE IT ISN'T THE full-blown, range-topping high-end GTX variant, the 7900 GT slipped in beneath the radar, with only two manufacturers represented with this medium to high-end offering. We're very pleased they did however, as the new 90nm GT is a very interesting card and an extremely compelling one if you're looking at buying a new GPU any time soon.

Our two samples were provided by Esquire and SonicInformed, in the form of the PixelView and XFX 7900 GT variants respectively.

PIXELVIEW GEFORCE 7900 GT

SUPPLIER: ESQUIRE
PRICE: R3699



THE THING ABOUT THIS new GT chip is that it's exactly the same, feature for feature, as the GPUs used on the more expensive GTX cards. The only difference is in the clock frequency, which is down to 450MHz for the core and 1.2GHz for the 256MB of GDDR3 RAM. This memory is still accessed via a 256-bit bus, and the pipelines employed are exactly the same as those of the GTX.

But even at these stock frequencies, the 7900 GT got out of the blocks with a bang, beating out the Legend 7800 GTX 256MB reference card in the synthetic benchmark runs, albeit by the narrowest of margins. The PixelView managed to score 4,540 in 3DMark06 at 1,280 x 1,024, and still managed 3,854 at 1,600 x 1,200. The 7800 scored 4,478 and 3,790 respectively at its stock clocks.

The less shader intensive routines of 3DMark05 saw the GT widen this gap even further, and it comfortably outperformed the 7800 GTX in this benchmark with an astounding 7,865 at the default resolution run, and 5,886 at 1,280 x 1,024 with 4x AA and 16x AF turned on. The second result is over a thousand points above the older generation offering.

This difference made itself felt in our two real world gaming tests as well, with X³ averaging 52.806fps at 1,280 x 1,024 with all details on high, but no AA or AF. With a 7900 GT in your machine, F.E.A.R. is also still perfectly playable at 1,280 x 960 with 4x AA and 16x AF. At these settings, the built-in benchmark run showed a low of 29fps, which was touching borderline to be honest, and a respectable average of 50fps.

A very solid showing then and the PixelView wasn't done. Some quick fiddling with Coolbits had the card running at a 551MHz core with the RAM clocking 1.56GHz.

XFX GEFORCE 7900 GT

SUPPLIER: AXIZ
PRICE: R3199



ALTHOUGH THERE'S LITTLE TO indicate the fact to you on the box, or the card itself for that matter, this XFX is a factory-overclocked 7900 GT. Straight out of the box, this card runs a core frequency of 520MHz, with RAM boosted to 1.5GHz for even more 'stock' performance.

Performance benefits are immediately noticeable, with 3DMark06 scoring the XFX 4,302 at 1,600 x 1,200.

In this case, synthetic figures were mirrored in modern gaming titles, if F.E.A.R. and X³ were anything to go by. An X³ average of 52.999fps was just 0.001fps shy of 53fps, and F.E.A.R. was still quite comfortably playable with 4x AA and 16x AF at 1,280 x 960, with a low of 33fps and decent average of 57fps.

As if all this wasn't impressive enough, Coolbits blew us away. The XFX finally called it quits at a core overclocked to 552MHz, with the RAM running at a massive 1.716GHz effective! This tweak not only gave the synthetic numbers a healthy boost, but had the card averaging almost 55fps in the X³ benchmark run – very close to what the 90nm GTXs were doing in this test!

And with that, we have our clear-cut winner of the 7900 GT category, the XFX. This is the GPU to own if you can't quite stretch the budget to that extreme GTX-spec price point, and is highly recommended for the average gamer as well as obsessive overclockers.

7600 GT

ALTHOUGH THE 7600 GT might be considered by most as the 'budget' range of the new 90nm NVIDIA offerings, it nonetheless represents what will undoubtedly be the highest-selling of this first wave of products through pure economic laws. Whether it's actually worthy of the attention of these thousands of gamers and enthusiasts across the world, we have yet to see.

XFX 7600 GT

SUPPLIER: AXIZ

PRICE: R1999



THIS MANUFACTURER HAS CLEARLY gone completely bananas with the 90nm NVIDIA architecture, releasing a huge raft of products from standard to factory-overclocked variants in every price segment. It has no less than four variants just in the 7600 GT class for instance. In this case, we are looking at the standard-clocked 7600 GT from XFX, featuring the reference frequencies of 560MHz for the core and 1.4GHz effective on the RAM, which here is accessed via a 128-bit interface rather than the full-bore 256-bit of its bigger brethren.

In 3DMark06, the XFX scored a decent 3,131 at the default settings, and although cracking the resolution up to 1,600 x 1,200 brought this figure down to 2,599, it didn't cripple the new budget GPU. In 3DMark05, this card scored 5,970 at 1,024 x 768, but boosting resolution and applying 4x AA and 16x AF took its toll – the overall result fell by just over 2,000 points.

Interestingly, the 7600 GT had little trouble with X³ at its standard settings of 1,280 x 1,024 with all details on high and 0x AA and 0x AF. Sure, with pixel-sharpening effects applied it ground to a halt, but an average of 53.947fps is extremely playable without these turned on! F.E.A.R. reflected the card's lowly pricing more realistically, with the game still borderline-playable at 1,280 x 960, with a lowest of 25fps and an average of 55fps. With AA and AF applied, this tumbled to 13fps and 30fps respectively, and the game couldn't be enjoyed any longer.

So, the first in our budget line-up impressed us, but can the other 7600-based offerings outdo the enthusiast-orientated XFX here?

CHAINTECH 7600 GT

SUPPLIER: SONICINFORMED

PRICE: R1899



JUST LIKE WITH THE Chaintech 7900 GTX, this bundle is sparse at best. Some DVD software, a 5-in-1 game CD, and that just about covers it. Fortunately this is acceptable in a budget offering; at least more so than with a high-end model.

Once again, the card itself comes clocked at the reference frequencies of 560MHz and 1.4GHz. Its performance is all but identical to the XFX above in absolutely every respect. With 3,998 for 3DMark05, at 1,280 x 1,024 with 4x AA and 16x AF, it's slightly higher than the XFX. In 3DMark06, it managed an identical 3,131 for the default run.

With real world game benchmarks churning out scores in almost every respect identical to the XFX, we felt no need to labour on about them here. The 7600 GT is just not a high-end gaming card, and considering some of the impressive hardware we have looked at in this test, cannot impress sufficiently to warrant going into detail about.

That said, the 7600 GT does have some advantages. It's probably the highest-performing card to only draw power from the PCI-E bus that we know of, and it runs cool and quiet even when being stretched. For a media centre PC that will occasionally play a game, and probably not too demanding a title at that, it could well work. But if it's pure fps you're looking for, you might want to look around for an older, higher-end card for your money.

ASUS EN7600GT SILENT

SUPPLIER: FRONTOSA

PRICE: R2456



ASUS DITCHED THE SMALL and unobtrusive cooler of the 7600 GT in favour of its (at this point) highly evolved Silencer cooler. While this unit is elaborate and rather chunky, it is effective and offers the full performance of the GPU with an absolutely zero noise penalty.

The Asus bundle is also worth mentioning. Like the Chaintech offerings, the

Asus 7900 GTX and 7600 GT come with almost identical packaging, which works in favour of Asus as it includes a lot more software, as well as a full version of King Kong. Some good additional value there, although you do pay for this (as well as the silent cooler).

So how does it actually perform then? The 90nm manufacturing process clearly works well with the Silencer cooling method. Not once did the 7600 GT reach temperatures that would cause it to have problems even after extended testing. In fact, even when overclocked the passive coolers were able to keep the core well within safe levels of heat generation.

At stock frequencies however, the Asus offering delivered consistently higher scores than the others in this segment, managing 3,309 in the 3DMark06 default run, and a more impressive 4,288 in 3DMark05 at 1,280 x 1,024 with 4x AA and 16x AF enabled. In F.E.A.R., it yielded a 10fps difference in the average fps, compared to other cards in this segment, at 1,280 x 960 with 0x AA and 4x AF. A lowest framerate of 27fps and an average of 65fps made the game slightly more playable at this quality level than with other 7600 GTs.

Combine this performance with the clear benefits of a superior bundle and totally silent cooling solution, and we have our winner in the 7600 GT subsection!

XFX 7600 GS

SUPPLIER: AXIZ

PRICE: R1395



THIS COMPANY WAS THE only one to provide us with a complete breadth of offerings, right from this absolute entry-level card up to 7900 GTX level. Clearly, XFX is going big on the 90nm NVIDIA parts.

That said however, bad experiences with GS-branded cards in the past have made us wary of the moniker, and once again this wariness proved correct. The 7600 GS may be incredibly cheap, but it's also really not a gaming card at all. In 3DMark06 it could barely scrape together 2,500 points at the default settings, and neither X³ nor F.E.A.R. was exactly playable at the standard detail levels. You have to drop X³ down to 1,024 x 768 to even approach an average of 50fps (the XFX managed 48.17fps), while F.E.A.R. has to go down to 800 x 600 to get a low fps reading of 24 and an average of 51fps.

The XFX GS does feature a large, passive cooler however, and the company has actually juiced-up its looks with green DVI ports. It could be ideal for a media centre PC, offering all the benefits of the NVIDIA PureVideo goodies for high-quality movie playback at a very affordable price.

IN CONCLUSION

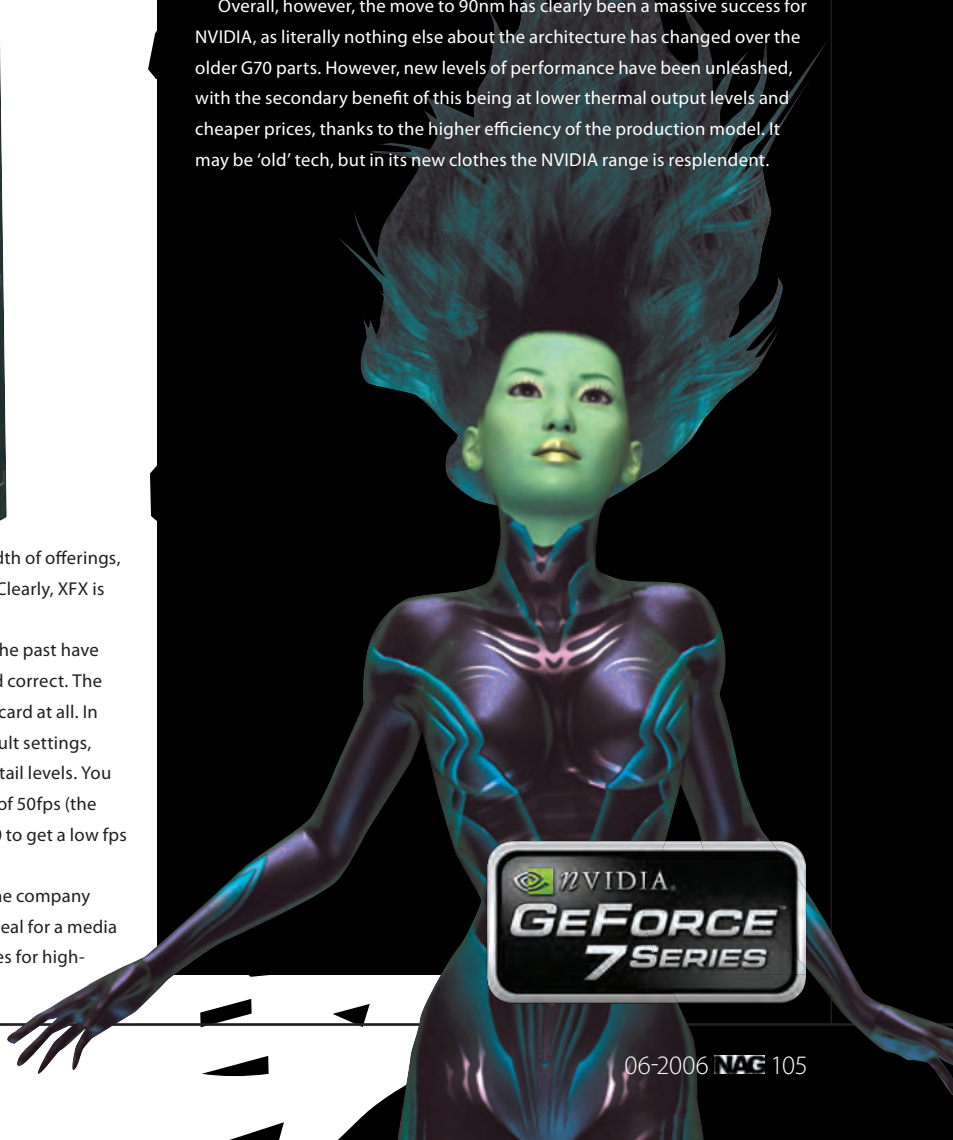
AFTER COMPLETING THIS EXHAUSTIVE battery of benchmarks, we were left with no doubt that NVIDIA has made the right move. The 90nm parts are clearly superior to NVIDIA's old 110nm GPUs, and even beat out their 90nm ATI counterparts in the high-end space.

In fact, the cards built around the 7900 GTX outshine all rivals by some margin. Although some benchmarks will still suit the X1900XTX better, overall the 7900 offers the best combination of bang for your buck and future-proofing in a GPU today. Now we're just waiting for the board manufacturers themselves to start getting a little creative with the chipset and the HSF, and push out more interesting designs possibly with even more capable overclocking abilities. For now, however, the Gainward Bliss is our top-ranked 7900 GTX offering.

What's more, in the 7900 GT's playground, nothing from any sector can come close to challenging the performance of this beastie at the price point. Factor in astonishing overclocking potential made possible by the more efficient transistors in the GPU itself, and it seems likely that NVIDIA is set to dominate this hotly contested space for at least the next few months. And the factory-overclocked XFX example reaches levels of performance which almost challenge its bigger brother! An impressive showing indeed. Axiz has a winning brand on its hands with this range.

Although the budget 7600 GT failed to impress, it must be remembered that our benchmarks were conducted in the context of the 7900 range for the most part. If you compare competing cards at this low-end of the price scale, the 7600 GT is really not a bad offering. And our testing suggested you wouldn't go too far wrong with one of the silenced Asus examples, if your budget can stretch that little bit further.

Overall, however, the move to 90nm has clearly been a massive success for NVIDIA, as literally nothing else about the architecture has changed over the older G70 parts. However, new levels of performance have been unleashed, with the secondary benefit of this being at lower thermal output levels and cheaper prices, thanks to the higher efficiency of the production model. It may be 'old' tech, but in its new clothes the NVIDIA range is resplendent.



SIN CITY

Cast: Bruce Willis, Mickey Rourke, Jessica Alba

Director: Robert Rodriguez, Frank Miller

Genre: Comic Noir

Rating: 16V

A COP RESCUES A LITTLE girl from a politician's psychotic rapist son and is shot by his partner. A gunman helps warring prostitutes from a mob plot to take their territory and a killing machine goes on the rampage to avenge the one woman who loved him. Welcome to Sin City..

The Movie: Based on the Frank Miller graphic novels, this is a gritty and edgy film, though based in the deeply noir and slightly fantastic universe of Sin City. Shot to resemble the comic style visually, it goes well beyond what contemporary comic films have done. Sin City looks and feels like the real deal, plus the great characters from Willis and Rourke and a stellar cast (Elijah Wood is especially surprising) give it a lot of depth. You could find problems



if you nitpicked around. It is a comic-book movie, so the characters aren't that deep. But in terms of a film based on a comic, it's the best that has been made.

The DVD: trailers make up the rest. Hopefully a special edition will surface at some point.

WALLACE & GROMIT: THE CURSE OF THE WERE-RABBIT

Cast: Peter Sallis, Ralph Fiennes, Helena Bonham Carter

Director: Nick Park, Steve Box

Genre: Family Animation

Rating: A

WALLACE AND GROMIT RUN a successful and humane pest control business, keeping rabbits away from the gardens of the townsfolk. With the big annual competition around the corner, the vegetables are even more precious. But a large and dangerous creature arrives that is more than a mere rabbit...

The Movie: The duo goes for a feature length film and delivers the best in the series yet. With more elaborate action sequences and an equally crazy story, Wallace & Gromit translates well to the big screen. Some of the characters aren't as strong as we're used to, but the stars shine. If you enjoyed any of the original shorts, watch this already.



The DVD: A making of, commentary, deleted scenes and the 'History of Wallace & Gromit' are the highlights of a decent set of extras. Only English subtitles, though.



STRAIGHT OUTTA BENONI

Genre: Comedy

Age Rating: PGL

The Crazy Monkey crew translate their MTV success to the big screen. A day in the life of Brendan and Gavin who, after getting fired, gamble the gig they are playing at that evening to get their photo in the local paper before the Matric reunion. It's camp and clumsy, but not bad if you enjoy the sense of humour - dry but unsophisticated. Still, there are a few laughs in it.

Features: If you want more about this movie, it delivers. With two DVDs, it's packed with documentaries, trailers and music videos.



HOUSE

Genre: Horror/Comedy

Rating: 16

Roger Cobb moves into his dead aunt's house in the hope of finding his son. Soon the house starts messing with his head in this classic mid-80s horror. It's not scary anymore, but the camp gore and strange plot still make it a lot of fun to watch. It's a gem from the era, produced by Sean 'Friday the 13th' Cunningham.

Features: Nothing. It's an import title with Dutch subtitles (the movie is English), but at least you can get the uncut House on DVD.

10 REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD BE AT HOME WATCHING OUR MAGAZINE

JUNE/JULY ISSUE OF SA MOVIE & DVD



Superman Returns
Pirates of the Caribbean 2 & 3
Scary Movie 4
When a Stranger Calls
Omen 666
New movie by the Sixth Sense director
New Brad Pitt Western (we kid you not!)
Ultraviolet
16 Blocks (Bruce Willis)
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The Great and Secret Show

IDW R31.50

CLIVE BARKER'S NOVEL OF the same name has been adapted into this interesting comic book series. When a man learns about an alternative reality, while working at a dead letters office in Omaha, he tries to discover it. In doing so, he becomes more powerful and evil. Eventually he enlists the help of a genius to create a drug that will take him to that reality. It's hard to think that something this bizarre made for a great novel, but it definitely works well as a comic. This is addictive reading, but like Barker, it's a select taste. By the end of this first issue, the two characters are demi-gods and spiralling into a sort of cosmic conflict. That's a far cry from the imagery the comic book starts with.



X-Men: Deadly Genesis

Marvel Comics R26.50

FANS OF THE X-MEN would definitely want to grab the entire six-part Deadly Genesis mini-series. Professor Xavier went missing in the House of M series, thus Deadly Genesis is out to find him. But it also involves a new mutant threat that ties into an X-Men plot point last used in 1993. The art style is traditional and solid, plus long-time X-Men readers are bound for a few interesting treats. One interesting piece of trivia is that the series also celebrates the 30th anniversary of Giant-Size X-Men #1. As a bonus, each issue contains a mini-story introducing a new mutant. The series only recently finished its run, so getting all six issues on backorder should be easy. There's likely to be a trade paperback as well.



Batman: Under The Hood

DC Comics R77.95

"VERY NOSTALGIC." THAT WAS the Black Mask's reaction when he looked at a picture of the Red Hood, a mysterious new figure in Gotham's underworld. The Red Hood was originally worn by The Joker before he took a tumble into the chemical vat. But this isn't The Joker and he is a highly capable opponent to Batman and Nightwing. Mr. Freeze also features prominently in this light-weight Batman collection. It's a good story, but it runs into cliché territory fairly often, plus the inside art is quite plain compared to the Matt Wagner covers. The Joker and other Batman alumni have cameos, though the Red Hood's identity isn't entirely as vague as it seems. But he does make for an interesting villain.



Sgt. Rock

DC Comics R31.50

HERE'S SOMETHING THAT YOU and your dad might have in common. Sgt. Rock has been around since the fifties and ran up to the late eighties. Since then, it has been in hiatus until the 2003 graphic novel, *Between Hell & A Hard Place*. This spurred Sgt. Rock co-creator Joe Kubert to write and illustrate a 6-issue miniseries that started in January. The art style is actually quite refreshing and the hard (but not Vertigo hard) story reminds of the great World War II movies. The plot and 'Nazis as bad guys' approach seem heavy for its presentation, especially since comics have matured into much darker themes and questions. But fans of the series won't be disappointed, plus Sgt. Rock and Easy Company has a lot of new aspects that will entice new readers.



ASUS EN7600GT SILENT Graphics Card with Effective Heat-Dissipating SilentCool2 Technology and Peter Jackson's King Kong

Fan-less Thermal Solution to go with Leading Video Performance

Powerful systems and overheating concerns are almost synonymous, especially when hardcore users try to tax the graphics cards like there's no tomorrow. The high-end appeals of graphics cards are often sabotaged by noisy high-speed fan solutions that affect overall audio/video experience. However, the recent introduction of EN7600GT SILENT from ASUS has outfitted the cards with advanced SilentCool fan-less innovation that helps to keep the GPU temperatures down to a bare minimum, while sustaining maximum performance capacity

Performance is exactly the key in the development of EN7600GT SILENT, which excels at the clock speed of 560 MHz (core GPU) with 700 MHz (1.4ns DDR3 memory). In providing the users with best gaming experience, the EN7600GT SILENT offers exclusive ASUS innovations to improve gaming interaction, allowing users to milk every drop of power out of the cards for desired performance. But it doesn't stop right there! The EN7600GT SILENT also come bundled with Peter Jackson's King Kong: the Full Edition Official Game of the Movie, for complete experience instantly right out of the box.

The enhanced noiseless SilentCool2 enables superior performance

Employing years of hardware expertise, the ASUS engineering division equipped the EN7600GT SILENT with the evolutionary ASUS SilentCool® 2 thermal solution to offer noiseless operation to go with robust GPU performance. The ASUS EN7600GT SILENT is specifically engineered with heat dissipating pipes and extra heatsinks to sustain maximum GPU capacity. Leveraging the thermal efficiency of CPU fans, the unique rotation design on the fin transfer heat away from GPU with noiseless 0dB cooling process, while simultaneously reduces GPU temperature considerably. The efficient cooling designs results in a graphics card with unrivaled performance for ultimate video quality aficionados.

Model Name	EN7600GT Silent/2DHT/256M
Graphics Engine	GeForce 7600GT
Video Memory	256M -1.4ns DDR3
Engine Clock	560MHz
Memory Clock	1.4GHz(700MHz DDR3)
RAMDAC	400MHz
Bus Standard	PCI-Express
Memory Interface	128-bit
Max Resolution	2048x1536
DVI Output	DVI-I
2nd DVI Output	Yes
HDTV Output	Yes, via HDTV Cable
VGA Output	Yes, via DVI to VGA adaptor
2nd VGA Output	Yes, via DVI to VGA adaptor
Adaptor/Cable bundled	HDTV out adaptor*1 DVI-to-2nd VGA adaptor*2
Software Bundled	King Kong full game Xpand Rally

Leading edge video capability

Apart from the hardware ingenuity, the EN7600GT SILENT offers overclocking ability to satisfy hardcore gamers and provide top-shelf graphics quality capable of supporting dual DVI, dual VGA, HDTV-out and delivering industry's fastest anti-aliasing for ultra-realistic visuals, the EN7600GT SILENT adopted Microsoft DirectX9.0 Shader model 3.0 to ensure stunning and complex special effects.

Complete Gaming Experience

In addition to industry-leading specifications, the two graphics cards also incorporated exclusive innovations found only on ASUS solutions.

ASUS GameReplay: Practice makes perfect, and that holds true in gaming as well. For popular LAN (local area network) party team games such as Counter Strike and Unreal Tournaments, strategy is the key to victory. GameReplay records gaming action into MPEG4 video files so that teams can review all the moves and tactics to

▲ Swivel fin design direct heat away from critical component

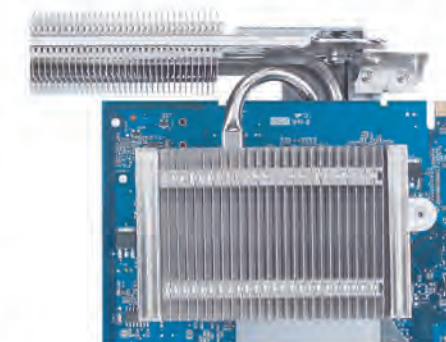
improve for the next tournament. The recorded files can also be used as screen savers or posted on blogs.

GameLiveShow: Just like people who share their lives and thoughts on blogs, expert gamers often want to show off their perfectly executed strategies and five-hit combinations. GameLiveShow is created to allow gamers to stream broadcast their gaming experiences live over the Internet. Other players can now go online to check out how the experts really do it.

GameFace Messenger: It is a user-friendly interface similar to those of the most popular messenger services to simplify the process of inviting multiple players to a gameferences (game conferences). Register, log on and start the fun. GameFace Messenger is as easy as the free messengers currently in the market.

Splendid Video Intelligence Technology: Built into the driver of ASUS graphics cards, Splendid detects activation and usage of video applications and automatically optimizes image quality for the best visual results. Splendid further provides five modes for best visual results in different video applications (Standard, Game, Theater, Scenery and Night)

By teaming up powerful graphics processing, unique gaming feature and innovative cooling design, ASUS has successfully created a video card that can do just about anything. Along with the red-hot game of the year "King Kong" shipped in the same box, this is certainly an offer no one can refuse.



▲ Extra heatsink in the other side of GPU for effective dissipation

THE RAVEN'S LOFT

By Alex Jelagin

LOW-TECH GAMING

WELCOME TO THIS RESURRECTION of an old section. Role-players will no doubt be comfortable with this, as necromancy is quite common in many role-playing systems. One way in which this column will differ vastly from the rest of this magazine is the non-existent minimum system requirements for most games we will be discussing. Although in this digital day and age, the need for paper and a pen may well prove to be a more stringent requisite!

IT'S MAGIC!

The ever-popular collectible card game has just been expanded with another set. Dissension completes the Ravnica block, and introduces the last three two-colour guilds in this setting. At pre-release events, the Rakdos guild, which represents the black-red colour combination, proved very popular, due largely to its aggressive nature. Aggressive decks tend to do well in limited formats like this, due to the fact that they rely less heavily on multiple copies of key cards than control-based decks do, and can be constructed from synergistic but disparate cards. Of course, the other two guilds (the law-abiding

Azorius and the Simic genetic engineers) were also represented.

Wizards of the Coast has not yet revealed its plans for the next expansion block. However, what is known is that an expansion that fits into the ancient Ice Age block, titled Coldsnap, will be the next project, even if an interim one.

CROSS-TECH FUSION

But Magic is not restricted to its cardboard variety - Magic Online provides players the ability to play online against other players around the globe. Good news for Magic Online players is the fact that Wizards is on a campaign to update this format to include the older sets, in addition to the newer stuff. Furthermore, the company is constantly expanding its range of formats playable online, with the recent addition of a couple of team formats.

So, it turns out we won't be staying away from technology entirely! Lastly, if you would like a specific topic covered, be it related to role-playing, collectible card games, table-top gaming or strategy for any of the above, drop me a mail at alex@sacm.co.za.



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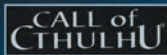
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START, STOP, GOAL

THOSE OF YOU WHO have been following the creation of Golem Master through its early stages will agree that it's high time there was some point to the game. It's time we have some sort of level progression and a goal for players to head towards. Grab 'GolemMaster_003.gm6' off the cover DVD and let's get cracking...

BUT FIRST, HERE'S A USEFUL TRICK:

Last month we realised that it was possible for our Golem to plod all the way off the screen if the player directed it to do so. There's a far more elegant solution than destroying the Golem when it gets outside the room, but it's slightly trickier. Hopefully some of you wondered why we didn't just make the Golem get destroyed on collision with a GridEdge object - they do surround the game board after all. There's just one problem with this idea: the Golem starts on a GridEdge, so it would destroy itself immediately!

We'll use a neat little Game Maker trick to allow the Golem to start on a GridEdge and still destroy itself when it collides with one later. The key is to use a variable in conjunction with a timer: First, we set a new variable 'ignoreGridEdge' to true in Golem's *Create* event; Then we use *Alarm 0* to set ignoreGridEdge to false; And finally we right-click on the *Outside Room* event and change it to *Collision with GridEdge* and stick the actions that are currently there in a block (using *Start/End a block*). Above the block place an *If a variable has a value* action that tests if ignoreGridEdge is not 'true' and below the block place an *Else* followed by *Set Alarm 0 to 2*. [See **Image 1**]

Run the game and watch how it works: while the Golem is colliding with a GridEdge and ignoreGridEdge is true, it keeps restarting the timer that will change ignoreGridEdge, so the timer only gets triggered **after** the Golem stops colliding with a GridEdge. Once the timer fires, any later collision with a GridEdge will destroy the Golem as before. This timer-reset trick is very handy when you need objects to have multiple reactions to the same thing at different times.

DESIRED GAMEPLAY FLOW

The way we want our players to play Golem Master is quite linear. They're presented with a puzzle that contains jumbled-up tiles and reminded of the goal they need to get to. The player then has a chance to move tiles around until they reach a configuration he or she likes. Then the player tests the configuration and watches the Golem move through the puzzle. At this stage, one of three things can happen: either the Golem completes the puzzle by meeting the goal and the player progresses to the next puzzle, or the Golem is destroyed and the Golem resets, or the player decides that his or her solution isn't going to work and resets the Golem.

We'd like to make sure that the Golem can only be set in motion when the player hasn't 'picked up' any tiles. This means that our current system that allows GolemStart to create a Golem whenever the spacebar is pressed isn't good enough. We'll fix that shortly. It would also be good design to

let the player reset the puzzle whenever he or she feels like it, so we'll need a button to allow that. And finally, because we're trying to encourage tactical thinking, it would be a great idea to restrict the number of tiles that the player can 'pick up' at the same time.

RESTRICTING STORED TILES

We'll start with the simplest solution first. Remember our state system that governs Tile selection? All we need to do to limit the number of tiles that can be stored by our TileController is to add in a little bit of logic to the object that represents the Tile selection state: TileSelector. In TileSelector's *Create* event, simply add the following line of code at the bottom of the script action: 'if (TileController.storedTileCount >= **global.maxStoredTiles**) visible = false.' [See **Image 2**]

All this does is make the TileSelector invisible if the number of stored Tiles (in TileController) is greater than a global variable. If the TileSelector is not visible, we can't select a tile to pull it off the board! All that's left to do is set up the global variable. Add a *Set the value of a variable* action to TileController's *Create* event that sets 'global.maxStoredTiles' to 6.

START, STOP AND RESET BUTTONS

Because we'll want more than a couple of buttons, it's worth our while to create a Button parent object that will handle the essence of 'button-ness' and let us get on with the code unique to each button. Create a new Group called 'Buttons' and create a new object inside called 'Button'. Each Button we create will have a sprite with three states, just for effect: Normal, Mouse Over and Clicked. We'll control the Button's appearance by using *Set the value of a variable* to set **image_single** to the specific frame of the sprite we want to show. In our Button object *Create* and *Mouse Leave* set **image_single** to 0, *Mouse Enter* and *Mouse: Left Released* set it to 2, while *Mouse: Left Button* sets it to 1.

To use our Button parent for the Start Button, create a new object and call it 'StartButton'. Give it a new sprite and load 'startButton.gif' (found in 'Sprites.zip' on the DVD). Click on Edit Sprite and notice that this sprite contains multiple frames. Animated GIFs load this way in Game Maker. Don't forget to

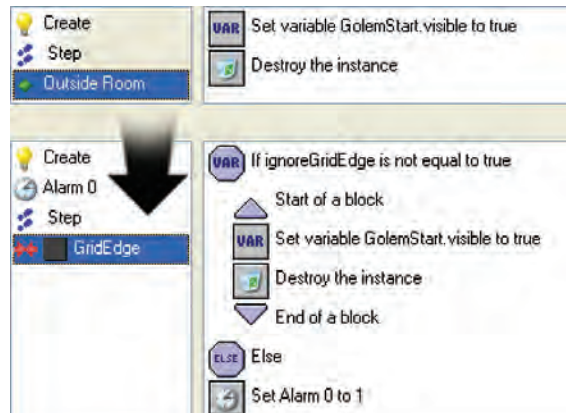


Image 1

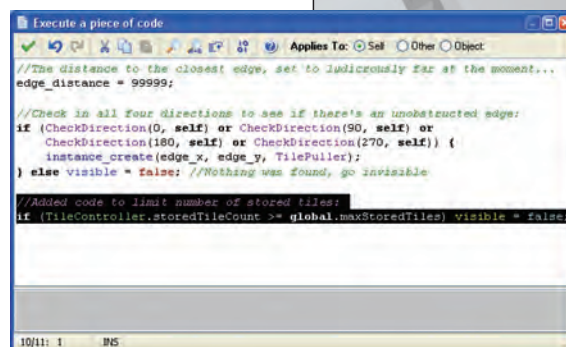


Image 2

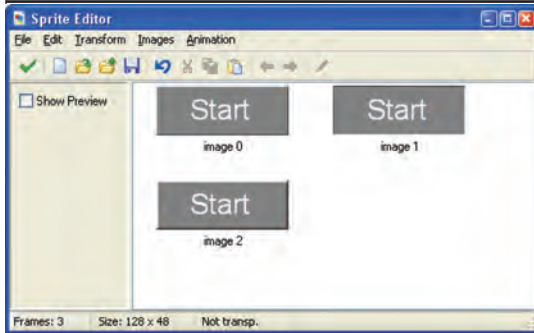


Image 3

set Button as StartButton's parent object. Place an instance of StartButton in the bottom left corner of our TestRoom and run the game. If you've done everything correctly, StartButton should behave like a Button with one small problem: it doesn't do anything! [See Image 3]

To make StartButton do something useful, we need to use its *Mouse: Left Released* event. To prevent our parenting breaking down, stick in a *Call the inherited event* action. Follow it with an *If a variable has a value* to test if 'TileController.storedTileCount' is equal to 0. Now *Start a new block* and copy-paste all the actions from GolemStart's *Keyboard: Space Released* event in here. Make sure that all three copied actions (the visibility test, spawning a new Golem and setting the visibility) apply to GolemStart by setting their 'Applies To:' fields to Object -> GolemStart. Now end the block. It's important that the three copied actions are in that block, otherwise strange things will start happening! Go ahead and delete the *Space Released* event from GolemStart and test out our Start Button. [See Image 4]

Creating a Stop Button is very similar to our Start button. StopButton should use Button as its parent and create its new sprite by loading 'stopButton.gif'. In its *Mouse: Left Released* event we *Call the inherited event*, *Delete instance* applied to Golem and *Set the value of a variable* to set 'GolemStart.visible' to true. To ensure that our Start and Stop Buttons replace each other when they need to, we do the following: (1) In StartButton's *Step* event we test *If 'GolemStart.visible' is equal to false* and if so, destroy the instance; (2) In StopButton's *Step* event we do exactly the same, but this time we only destroy the instance if 'GolemStart.visible' is true. In StartButton's *Destroy* event we *Create an instance* of StopButton at x, y; while in StopButton's *Destroy* event we *Create an instance* of StartButton at x, y. You should notice yet another state-based approach here...[See Image 5]

To allow the player to completely reset the puzzle, create a new Button (with Button as its parent) called 'ResetButton'. Load "resetButton.gif" for the required sprite. In its *Mouse: Left Released* event, stick a *Call the inherited event* action followed by *Restart the current room* (Main1 tab). Place this Button above the Start Button in TestRoom.

THE NOT-SO ELUSIVE GOAL

Giving the player a goal to reach is as simple as creating a new object called 'Goal'. We gave Goal a sprite that looks like a giant '@' symbol, but you can use whatever you like. Be sure to set its depth to 30, the same as that of a Tile. Have its *Destroy the instance* set to apply to other when it *Collides* with Golem. We'll use this collision event to do more things later such as go to the next puzzle, but for now it's enough to simply know that the

Goal was reached.

And finally, we need to make sure the Golem doesn't simply walk through Walls. Give Golem a *Collision* event with Wall in which it *Sets direction and speed of motion* to 0 and 0. Now we've got obstacles to overcome to reach the Goal.

We've created a number of puzzles and shown them here as screenshots. See if you can recreate and then solve them. Remember to uncheck **delete underlying** when you edit your room, otherwise you'll remove Floors that need to be under your Tile objects! **NAG**

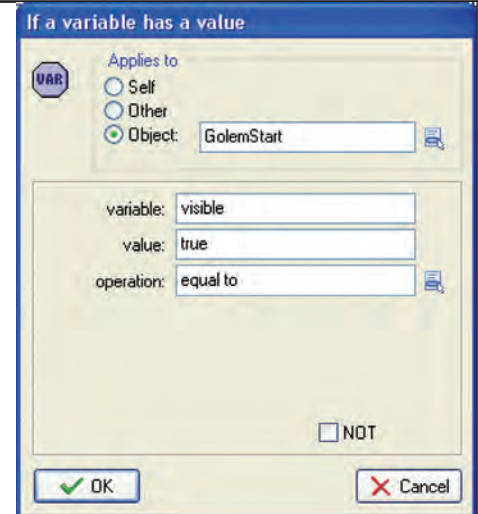


Image 4

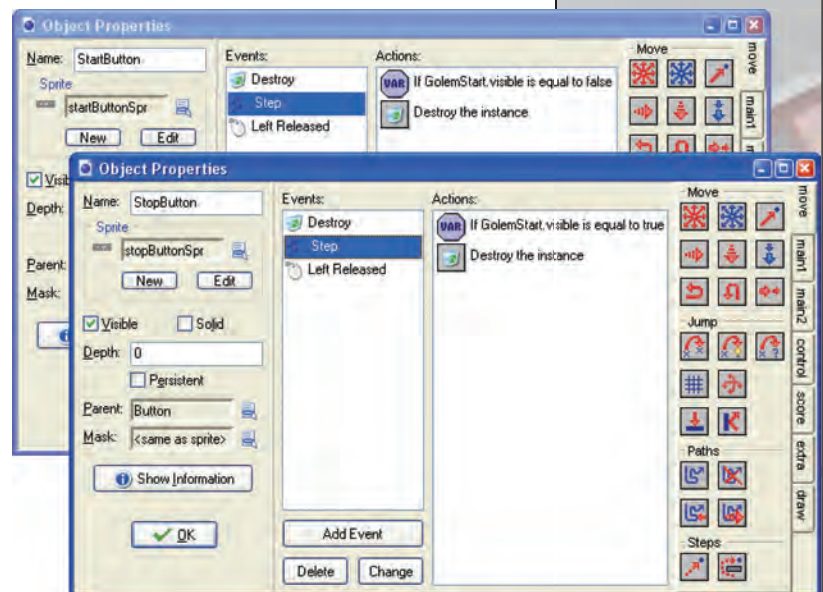
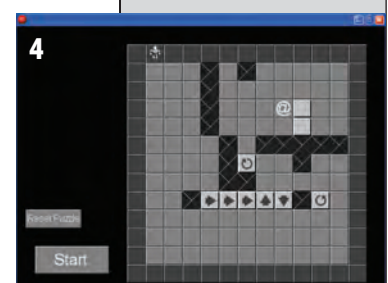
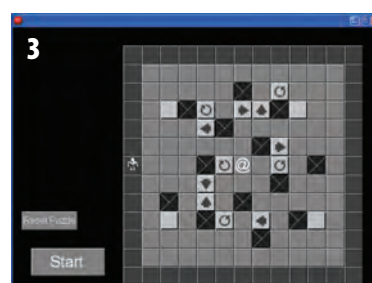
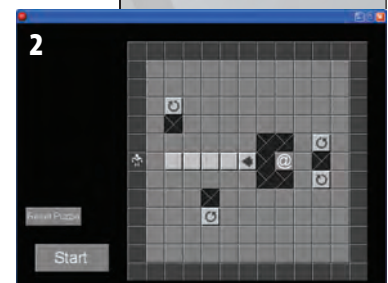
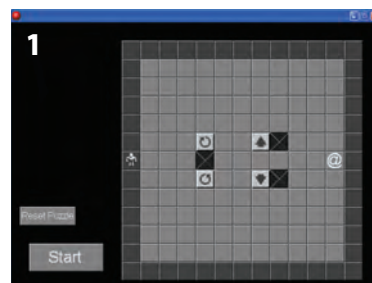


Image 5

Play sequence from top left



STARTING SMALL

WE DON'T ACTUALLY HAVE A GAME DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA. THERE ARE PRECIOUS FEW COMPANIES THAT YOU COULD APPLY AT TO WORK ON A GAME. YOUR CHANCES OF EVER SITTING IN FRONT OF A PUBLISHER TRYING TO PITCH A GAME ARE MINUTE... YET ALL OF US ARE DREAMING OF THE DAY WHEN WE GET THERE.

THE GAME DEVELOPMENT DREAM

If you spend a few days reading the online resources available that focus on 'breaking into' the game development industry, you'll find that it's only for realists and people who are prepared to work hard to achieve their dreams. You'll be constantly bombarded with the message that it's going to take a lot of effort and many false starts before you get that first job in the industry...

And that's for hopefuls who are in game development hotspots like the US or Europe. A realistic look at a career in game development in South Africa will be a lot bleaker, with a lot more barriers to entry than overseas. In fact, the reason that many of those barriers are no longer an issue to those wishing to 'break in' overseas is simply numbers. There have been so many people before them trying to get into the industry that a lot of the common hurdles have been removed.

THE ADVICE GIVEN OVERSEAS

The game industry is one of the few industries to really embrace the Internet one hundred percent. This means that it's possible to find literally tons and tons of well-meaning and helpful advice with a simple search. Aspiring game developers* have a wealth of information at their fingertips. Visit www.igda.org/breakingin/ and www.sloperama.com/advice.html for examples. *(A game developer is anyone who performs tasks that end up forming part of a completed game such as design, programming, art, sound, marketing, etc.)

There are certain common threads that run through all the advice that we've read, heard or otherwise been privy to.

(1) You need a qualification

The game development job market is very different to what it was ten years ago. Generations of gamers have grown up playing games and now they're eager to get involved in developing them. There are talented people out there who you will be trying to compete with, no matter what field you're interested in working in. Any advantage you can get is going to help you get that dream job. Having a degree in programming, graphic design, fine arts or English is going to help you in more ways than just getting your foot in the metaphorical door.

(2) You need samples of your own work

Whatever job you'll be applying for, you will need to be able to show that you can do and have done the work that you'll be expected to do. You need to demonstrate skill and talent in your field and at the same time convince your prospective employer that you can finish projects. A

game that never gets developed never makes any money and usually leads to that developer being out of work. The ability to finish what you've started is very important in the game development industry.

(3) You need to be a team player

The games you see on shelves aren't developed by industrious individuals, slaving away in front of their computers in dimly-lit basements. They're developed by skilled teams of people who need to work together through tremendous stress to ship a game on time. You need to be able to work well in a team and deal well with pressure.

(4) You need to have a passion for and an understanding of games

Why on earth would anyone in a game development company ever hire someone who doesn't enjoy games? Why would someone with no interest in games apply for such a position? It's an accepted fact of the industry that game development salaries are less than those offered for the same or similar skills elsewhere. A software architect at a database company will be making much more money than a software architect at a game development studio. The passion that you feel for playing games will stand out when you talk about them, but you have to like more than just the



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latest and greatest titles. You need to be able to hold intelligent conversations about what made certain games successful or why CS 1.6 is not as ground-breaking a game as many would have you believe. If you want to work on producing a hit game, you need to be able to look deeper than just flashy graphics and me-too design.

ADVICE THAT'S APPLICABLE LOCALLY

You may have realised by now that most (if not all) of the advice listed above is about how to get a job with an already established game company! This isn't from us, it's been distilled from hundreds of industry veterans overseas (and a couple of local ones) who have worked in game studios and shipped games. We'd love it if there were lots of local developers waiting to snap up skilled programmers, artists and designers. We'd get more games to play (and cheaper too)!

Unfortunately, the lack of a game development industry in South Africa makes it rather difficult to land yourself a job with a game development studio right from the word go. Companies like I-Imagine have to deal with hundreds of terrible applications as well as the worry of losing their skilled workers to the higher-paid doldrums of Web programming. You need to be something special to get picked up. Practically the only path that's readily available to most SA hopefuls is the route of starting their own company. The typical procedure for a game development company is to start up, acquire a license or a contract from a publisher, hire people for almost no money, work like crazy with almost no budget and hopefully finish the small project you've been given. It's only once you've proven yourself as a company that can deliver time and time again that people will even think of funding your own game instead of yet another license deal...

So, if you can't easily scrape together a few million rand, afford to fly back and forth to the US or Europe courting publishers, wow possible investors with amazing games that just need a marketing budget or happen to be related to Will Wright, you might want to lay off trying to start up your own company just yet.

That said, most of the international advice still applies, except locally it needs to be taken with a pinch of pragmatism:

Getting a qualification is still good. It helps if it's a qualification that can earn you money while you're working at making your dream of being a game developer a reality. Getting some understanding of business while you're at it would be an advantage.

Nothing is more important than having completed your own work. The more samples of your work there are out there for people to see, play and remember the better. Without samples you have no chance of getting someone with money interested in your talents. Start a Web page or blog about being a developer in Africa, and make a name for yourself.

Being a team player is extremely important locally. South Africans seem to have a tendency to want their own empires. Forget about that. Go out and find the people who can help you. Work with them, network and make contacts.

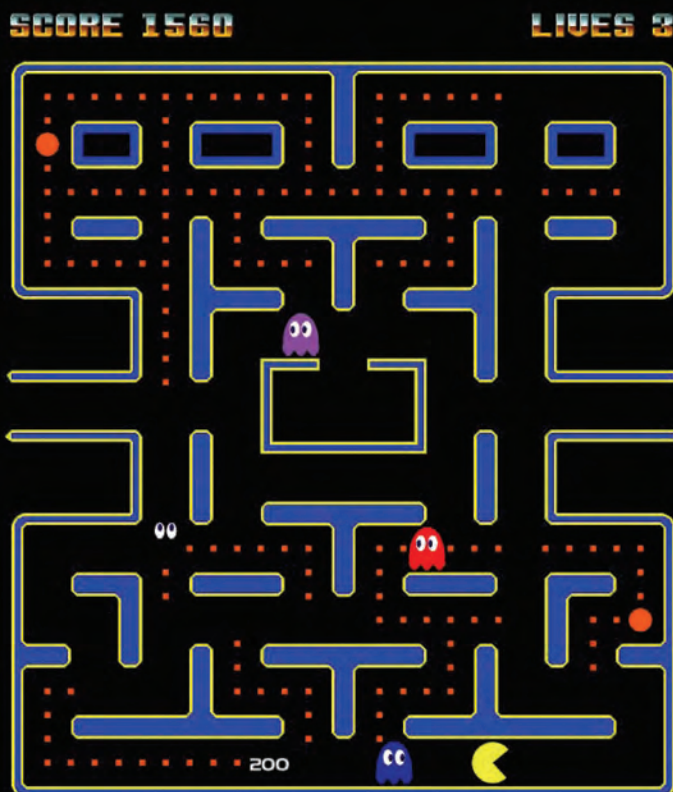
And finally, grow your **passion for games** as much as possible. Get to know why gaming in SA is different to the rest of the world. Play as many games as you can and understand what makes them tick. Take them apart and play around with their ideas.

THE ADVICE EVERYBODY TELLS YOU, BUT YOU WON'T LIKE

Start small. Chances are you've got hundreds of game ideas lying around. Are any of them finished? Why not? For each project that you start and don't finish, start smaller next time until you do eventually finish something. Learn from that and work your way up until it's possible for you to finish bigger and bigger projects.

Each project you complete is useful. You've learnt from that work, even if it's only what you've done wrong. Do whatever you have to do to complete a project! Guard against feature creep like mad and use whatever tools you can to minimise your work and get the job done.

Work your way up. You can get there if you keep taking steps towards your dreams instead of giving up because you can't jump there all in one go. Start small. **NAG**



Having finished Pacman or anything, isn't enough to get a game development job

Who:

- uses Notepad for a database?
- invented C++ after roundhouse kicking C - TWICE?
- has Windows XP on his Apple MAC?
- can write DVDs on his floppy drive?
- invented the internet?
- can paste pics in Notepad?
- has a monitor with no glare?
- can edit PDF files?
- has a yahoo account with hotmail?
- has an Intel CPU on an AMD motherboard?
- never forgets to send the attachments with his outgoing emails?

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MULTIPLAYER

ESWC 2006 SA CHAMPIONS CROWNED

AT THE CAROUSEL CASINO, fortunes are made, hearts are broken, stars are born, dreams are dashed... and we're not talking about gambling here. South Africa's most prestigious annual gaming tournament – the Rectron Electronic Sports World Cup qualifier – has taken place at this glamorous, secluded location since its inception in 2003. Doubts about the viability of the venue have long been put to rest, and what the Carousel lacks in proximity to civilisation it more than makes up for in comfort. The ESWC event has become a full-on weekend getaway with all the extras, where friends and team-mates gather to braai, drink, party hard, and sometimes play a few games. The cherry on the cake, as always, is a trip to France for the winners.

In terms of player capacity, the Rectron ESWC qualifier has not grown significantly over the past few years. Rather, the keyword is consistency. Arena 77 has built its reputation around this event, and players know they can expect a high level of professionalism. There has not been a single power or network problem at the Carousel since 2004, due to the Vaalhooligan Crew's scrupulous preparation. Having handled the technical side of the ESWC event since 2004, and the open LAN at three rAge events, their experience in managing large gaming networks is virtually unsurpassed. The numerous event badges on the VC staff jackets are starting to look like the combat insignia painted on fighter jets. If only our national air force was this decorated.

Sponsor presence and media exposure, however, are two things that have increased. Banners and exhibits covered every spare inch of the floor space, and at any given time one could see our host Len Nery escorting a different group of journalists or businessmen through the complex arrangement of tables and cables. This growing interest from both the corporate and media worlds can only push the sport to new levels, and it is already thanks to support from these companies – such as the title sponsor, Rectron, the network sponsor, D-Link and the server sponsor, Intel – that we have continually been able to host such successful events and send our top players overseas.

With that, we move on to the tournaments themselves. Four game types were supported this year, which is a big step up from the previous standard of only two or three. Roughly thirty-two of



The Gran Turismo event was in full swing

the country's best players or teams formed each of the competitive fields: Quake 4 (PC), Counter-Strike 1.6 (PC), WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne (PC), and Gran Turismo 4 (PS2).

Promising to return the Quake series to its former glory, Quake 4 didn't disappoint. Of course, with only a few scattered tournaments held prior to this ESWC, speculation ran wild as to who the top finishers would be. Each geographical region had their favourites. Gauteng was represented by names such as Team 42's Unreal Tournament champion Nico-Louis "Mielie" Joubert, Quake veteran Rikus "Gandulf" Jordaan and the notorious rail-gun abuser Farhaz "Lickwid Ice" Essa. From KwaZulu-Natal came Uberlan winner Mark "Lazarith" Fairbank and runner-up Richard "n00mz" Shuttleworth. Cape Town's hope rested on the Quake III emperor himself, Stephen "Ph4ntom" Cloete, and the team deathmatch machine from Quadrant 6, Jonathan "Manic" Bourne.

Also thrown into the mix were a large number of new hopefuls. Some of them had never attended a tournament before, but that was hardly enough to stop the verbal sparring.

The competition was overseen by ShadowOrphan of the Vaalhooligan Crew, who was faced with the difficult task of standardising the broken set of rules received from the ESWC organising committee in France. While his experience in running competitive events was perhaps a bit lacking, his willingness to consult with the players and his commendable ability to mediate between opposing points of view ushered in a relatively problem-free tournament. Network speeds were ideal, and the player area was well-removed from the noise of the open LAN. In a new initiative, the unseeded players were also given the opportunity of playing in a preliminary seeding competition to try to earn an easier group.

In two maps, Monsoon (16-8) and Pro-Bliptourney



Damage Control, the winners of the Counter-Strike tournament

(19-7), Ph4ntom became the first South African Quake 4 champion, and will now look towards the international competition in Paris, hoping to repeat – or even better – his performance of 2002 where he finished 7th worldwide.

The Counter-Strike tournament was in many ways a nostalgic return to Worfaire 2002, where the two powerhouse teams Damage Control and Bravado fought for top honours. Both teams had only recently been reformed, with very different line-ups from their original incarnations, but it seemed that the results would be much the same. Tournament director for Counter-Strike was again Mandus “Recon” Momberg, who lead his administration team through a flawless and highly-praised event. This was only the second instance in South African history of a CS tournament running according to schedule.

Damage Control (formerly called “Just 2 Good”) had been reformed in the aftermath of the dissolution of last year’s top two teams, Identity and Evolve. The players – Style, Hellhound, Incin, Apocalypse and Explicit – were the five most experienced in the country, and it was never going to be easy for anyone pitted against them. Bravado – consisting of Silencer, Surge, Cent, Detrony and Pure-Energy – would put up a reasonable fight, but there never looked like any chance of an upset, and DC won the grand final on de_cbble with a score of 16-9.

“We predicted beforehand the team that we were most likely going to face in the final, and the maps that we were going to face them on,” said Chris “Apocalypse” Lautré of Damage Control. “We weren’t going to take chances and so we prepared for the worst. I think that mindset actually helped us, because we didn’t take even a single round for granted, even if we had a comfortable lead.”

More interesting than the local competition, however, is the prospect of this team’s performance overseas. With easily the strongest combination ever, a favourable draw could finally mean qualification from the group stages in France.

WarCraft III has, since last year’s World Cyber Games qualifier, become rather predictable. The Quadrant 6 pair of Travis “Shase” Weedon and Caleb “Reaver” Ridley has dominated every event held, both in Gauteng and Cape Town. The only question was: which one of them would have the staying power to earn the trip to Paris? At the recent Lan2k tournament in Cape Town, they fought for a Toshiba laptop, and it was Reaver who won the encounter

fairly easily. That fact, coupled with his extensive training regime on the US East Battle.net servers, made him the favourite for the ESWC title. However, Shase already had two international tournaments under his belt, and promised to step up his practice to match Reaver’s.

As expected, the two met in the winner’s bracket final, with Shase playing as Undead and Reaver as Human. Ultimately it was to be a quick and easy 2-0 victory for Shase, whose big match temperament seemed to be as solid as ever. Reaver, though clearly disappointed, had no trouble dispensing with third place finisher Zilk in the loser’s bracket final. He returned to face Shase for the second time, and it proved a slightly more troublesome match, but Shase held his ground to win 2-1.

Gran Turismo 4 was a relatively small tournament, as the community for this new title (like FIFA at last year’s WCG) is still young and undeveloped. In a testament to the influence of heredity, the top three positions were all claimed by members of the same family. The winner, Dunno, was followed by his younger brother, Caged-Hate, in second place, and his father, Bunta-Sama, in third. The Gran Turismo tournament director, our very own Miktar Dracon, said he was impressed not only by the family’s skill, but also by their courtesy. Dunno was always the last person to sit down to play, first making sure all of his opponents were comfortably seated.

The only general criticism that can be made of the event concerns the prize distribution. While the total value of the prizes exceeded R300,000, only the top four finishers in each game type received a reward for their effort. Instead, the remaining prizes were simply given out to random members of the audience during the closing ceremony. Many members of the community have voiced their disapproval. “I didn’t agree with that decision,” explained Apocalypse. “Teams that practiced really hard for a top eight finish did not receive due credit. I think it would be nice to reward those teams and encourage them to play harder at the next competition - even if they are still out of the top four reach.”

But all in all, there is not much else about ESWC 2006 that can be faulted. “I personally loved the event,” said Apocalypse. “It was organised incredibly well, everything ran to schedule, and I really enjoyed watching some of the other finals on the big screen with the shoutcasting.” **NAG**



RESULTS:

QUAKE 4

1. zeal.Ph4ntom
2. 42/Mielie
3. Own3d :: Lazarith
4. 42/Gandulf

COUNTER-STRIKE 1.6

1. Damage Control
2. Bravado
3. Cold
4. Enigma

WARCRAFT III: THE FROZEN THRONE

1. q6'Shase
2. q6'Reaver
3. Zilk
4. [dA]Forced

GRAN TURISMO 4

1. Dunno
2. Caged-Hate
3. Bunta-Sama
4. SVS

LINEAGE II: THE CHAOTIC CHRONICLE

WEB: www.lineage2.com
DEVELOPER: PlayNC
PUBLISHER: PlayNC
RETAIL PRICE: TBA
TIMECARD PRICE: TBA
MONTHLY: \$14.99

YOU DON'T HAVE ENOUGH fingers on your hands, or on the hands of your friends, to count how many new First-Person Shooter games are released in a year. You can, however, count how many MMORPGs get released each year on a single digit, with change left over.

As a result, the MMORPG genre tends to take longer to evolve. New ideas in the genre are far and few between. Imagine if only eight FPS games had been released since *Wolfenstein 3D*, and you'd get the idea.

Lineage II is a great example of how the MMORPG genre isn't moving forward as fast as every other (still active) genre out there.

The game installs from a DVD and will need to update around 500MB after installation. An included TimeCard gives you a month of access. You can either buy more TimeCards once the month has expired, or subscribe at the monthly fee of \$14.99. Fifteen dollars is too pricey for any MMORPG, especially Lineage II.

All the usual MMORPG pitfalls are in Lineage II – experience grind, money grind, cheaters, poor server quality, repetitive gameplay and an entirely

unsupportive community. Unless you've been playing Lineage II since its release a few years ago, there is almost no reason to start now.

The 'newbie' areas, the starting zones for new players, are utterly nondescript and about as boring as you can get. You hobble from animal to animal, killing them indiscriminately until you are on a high enough level to participate in the basic quests – all quests are solo-quests. Only much later in the game, at much higher levels, do you get access to multi-user quests.

In the newbie areas, there are almost no human players with which to converse or to team up with. Lineage II is now entirely a high-level MMORPG for players who have been playing it for years. New players rarely sign up, mostly because of the huge level-gap between new players and the existing player base.

The races available for character creation are human, elf, dark elf, orc and dwarf – each with only two classes. The character customisation options are limited to scrolling through a few head designs and a few skin textures.

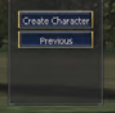
Visually, Lineage II still manages to impress. The new HDR feature breathes life into otherwise dated graphics. The game is built on the Unreal Engine 2 engine, and it's starting to show its age. Player models and enemy models are lifeless with perhaps two animations, one for idle and one for attacking. If you're lucky, you may spot a creature walking. The reason for this is that Lineage II has an intensive bandwidth requirement. Even on ADSL 1,024 to the fastest server your character will only respond after a good twenty seconds – enemies will only update every minute or so. This makes the

mindless killing required to get anywhere even more frustrating.

The design of Lineage II is something of an oddity. There's almost no rhyme or reason to how the world is put together. All races speak English with the same capacity (all have spelling mistakes, grammatical mistakes and other legacy elements from a Korean-to-English translation), while the quest-giving NPCs come across as entirely robotic. They verbosely tell you about their problems and then hand you an item to either go deliver somewhere, or ask you to get items from someone else. A popular quest-type is the 'go here and kill X of this creature type' – something the MMORPG genre should have gotten rid of over six years ago.

It may sound unduly harsh, but Lineage II is a game past its prime; one that fails dismally to capture the interest of the player, especially in light of other, better offerings available today. Considering the monthly subscription cost involved, the horrible lag and the uninspired game mechanics, there's no reason to get Lineage II – except if you're very desperate or very bored.

Lineage II does sport a huge player base of over four million players. You'd be lucky to meet other humans, though. The servers are all filled to the brim with 'bots', automatic programs that play the game for people because they don't want to play it themselves. **NAG**



PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

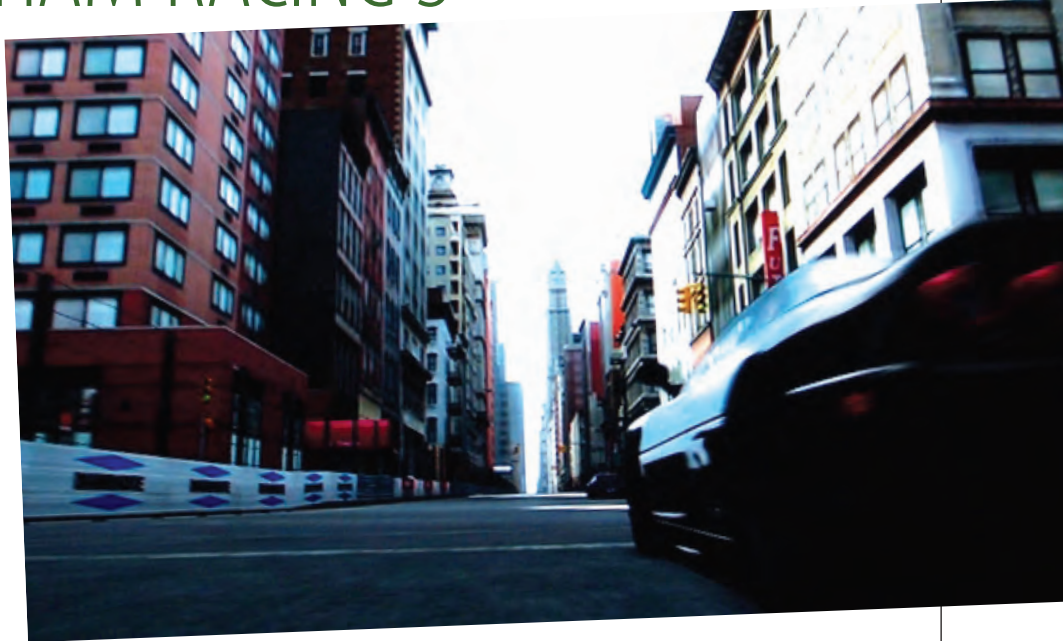
www.xbox.com/live

DESPITE THE XBOX 360 not having launched locally yet, there is already a strong local Project Gotham Racing 3 chapter, mostly due to the game's incredible Net code.

Project Gotham Racing 3, via Live, plays ultra-smooth, even on low-end ADSL connections. The game has various settings for online play, ranging from 'focus on Voice over IP' to 'focus on car accuracy'. Each setting specifically focuses on one component of the online play, either keeping the other cars as accurate as possible, or giving you crisp, clear voice over the headset.

Online racing comes in two flavours: Online Career or Quick Race. Online Career is more serious - a host of tracks combined into a season of sorts (how you do on the whole influences the final tally). The Quick Race is more fun for the casual gamer. The press of a button will search for the best game to join and connect you. Once in the lobby, you select a car and chat via the headset to the other players.

Once the race is on, Project Gotham Racing 3 really shows just how good its online play is. The other cars, as well as your own, drive and handle just like an offline single-player game. Often one



forgets one is playing online, reminded only by the (usually American) voices coming over the headset.

For those who like to sit back and watch, there is a Gotham TV option. Selecting the 'Heroes Channel' lets you watch the best of the best drive it out, while the 'Friends Channel' lets you watch your friends play

if they're currently in a game.

The local Project Gotham Racing 3 crowd is quite dedicated, not surprising considering South Africans have a penchant for racing games. You can easily find other locals online to race against, or even to give you a few tips.

ALL DRESSED UP AND NO ONE TO FRAG

TIRE OF FRAGGING THE same people, sniping the same 'n00bs' or trash-talking the same lame opponents? You could go outside and climb a tree, or you could head to the colourful world of IRC (Internet Relay Chat). Locally, gamers are centralised on one network, namely Shadowfire.

To connect to this network, you need an IRC client first. The easiest one is mIRC (www.mirc.co.za). Download the client, install, and then type '/server za.shadowfire.org'. This will connect you to the network. Once there, you have a variety of options.

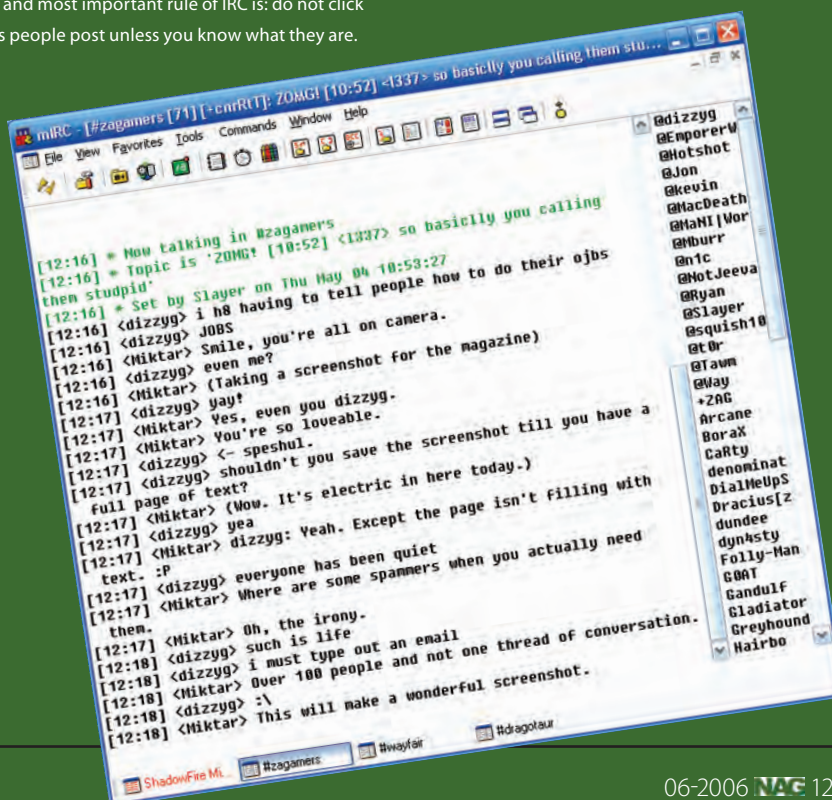
One to perhaps avoid is the channel #zagamers (to join a channel, type '/join' and then the channel name). #zagamers is the local watering hole for a lot of gamers who are on/off the whole gaming thing, depending on what day it is. While by far the most popular channel on the network, it is very much a no-man's-land where 'n00bs' get eaten alive.

If you're into Counter-Strike, join #pickup to find other Counter-Strike players for a quick pickup match. #wow is the haunt for World of Warcraft players, while #Q4 holds the Quake 4 veterans.

There is also #bf2.net for Battlefield 2 players and an almost defunct #warcraft3 for those who still play Blizzard's RTS.

There are a lot of other channels on Shadowfire - you can type '/list' to see them all.

Note: IRC is an un-moderated environment, a lawless land where anyone can say anything and insult anyone. Not for children or the easily offended. The first and most important rule of IRC is: do not click links people post unless you know what they are.



GAME OVER

EPILOGUE DEATH BY OJ

IT CAN HAPPEN TO anyone. The rogue glass of orange juice doesn't discriminate. It was a quiet day at the NAG office. Everyone was doing their collective thing. Usually the office is quiet. Headphones contain music, while the air-conditioner creates enough white-noise to drown out misaligned PC cooling fans.

But this peacefulness was broken by the soft clink of a glass falling over, followed by a stream of expletives confirming that the contents of the glass (500ml of fresh orange juice) had spilled.

Spilling onto a table, and just the table, wouldn't have been so bad. Instead, the glass tipped its load neatly onto, and into, a keyboard. There was so much orange juice that every key was outlined in bright orange. Had it not been so terrible, it might have actually looked cool.

The first impulse of any computer user, when confronted with the dreaded 'conductive liquid on electronics' situation, is a flick of the switch and a yank of the cable to save the keyboard from



shorting. But it didn't prevent what had to happen next.

Orange juice is nature's glue. Left standing for more than a second and suddenly every key on the keyboard is now a lethal sticky death-trap.

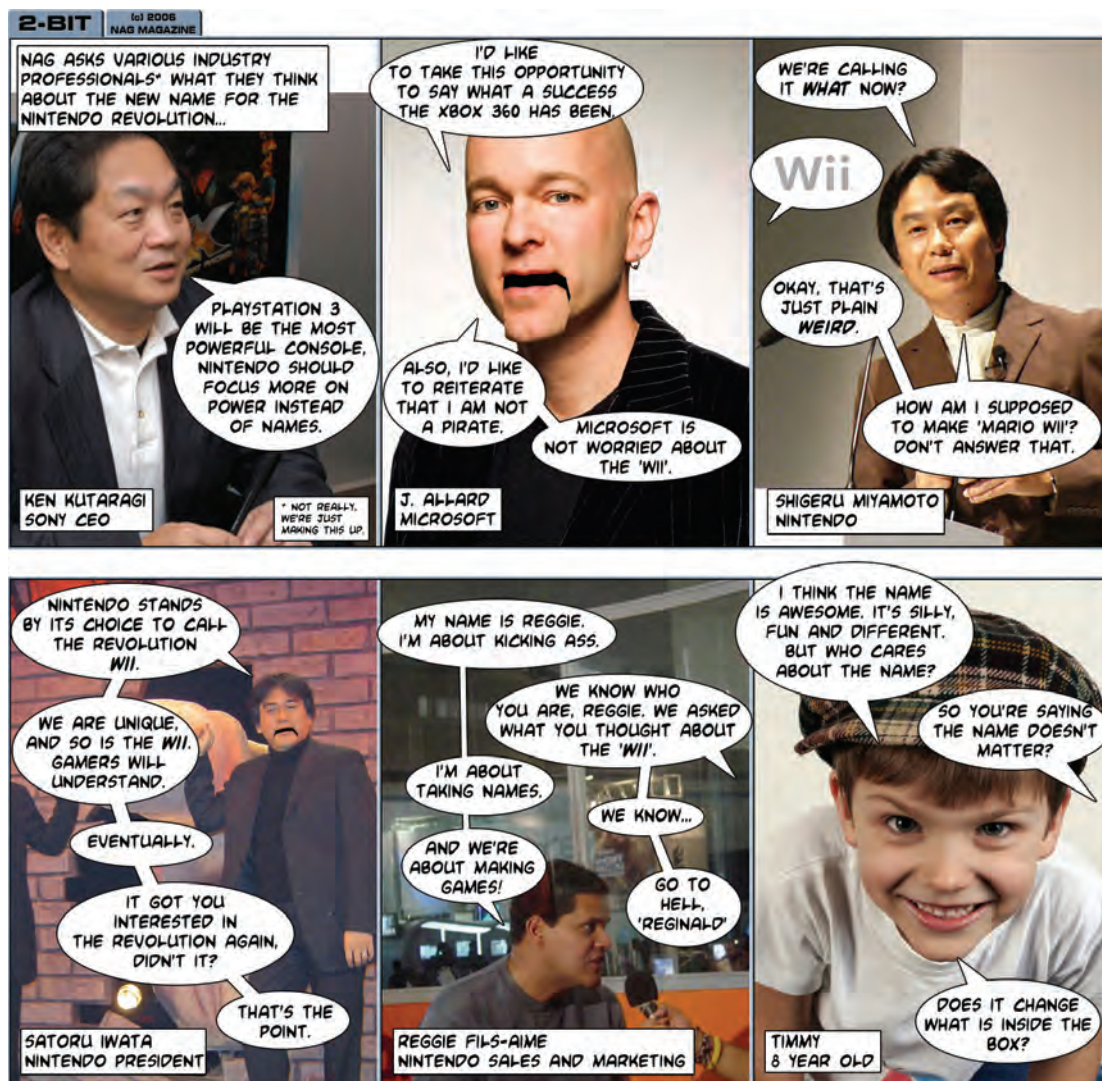
The person to whom this happened,

had to wedge out every single key and then hold the keyboard under running water – vigorous shaking dried the keyboard enough.

Often, the NAG office is a nest of exciting events, gaming euphoria and console carnage. But other times the NAG office is instead a location, housing a person who is, in turn, putting every single key back onto the keyboard and desperately trying to remember where the 'V' goes.

The moral of the story: nobody is safe from an orange juice nightmare, not even NAG. **NAG**

UPDATE: AAAAK! I just spilled Coke all over my keyboard!!!!



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I gotta Wii!



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